

GOOD INTENTIONS

Norms and Practices of Imperial Humanitarianism

The New Imperialism, Volume 4

Edited by
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Front cover image: According to the official caption, this is US Navy Hospital Corpsman 2nd Class Porfirio Nino, from Maritime Civil Affairs Team 104, practices speaking Kinyarwanda, one of the official languages of Rwanda, during a civil observation mission in Bunyamanza, Rwanda, August 7, 2009. (DoD photo by Senior Chief Mass Communication Specialist Jon E. McMillan, US Navy. Public domain.) This particular photograph was also used as the lead image for 2011 presentation by AFRICOM titled, "United States Africa Command: The First Three Years". On the image the following words were superimposed: "Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngamantu' I am a person through other people. My humanity is tied to yours.~ Zulu proverb"

Back cover image: According to the official caption, these are US Airmen assigned to the 23rd Equipment Maintenance Squadron, 75th Aircraft Maintenance Unit "downloading" an A-10C Thunderbolt II aircraft during an operational readiness exercise at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia, August 4, 2009. (DoD photo by Airman 1st Class Joshua Green, US Air Force. Public domain.)

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Queers of War: Normalizing Lesbians and Gays in the US War Machine



Hilary King

When considering the legacy of the US as a nation, of all the characteristics available, “gay-friendly” should not be one that readily comes to mind first. Being a nation born of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and patriarchy, it is perhaps not remarkable that the nation has been a site of heteronormativity since its inception. Yet in recent years, the US (as well as other western countries) has begun to represent itself as a leader in rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people (LGBT), setting examples for the rest of the world in the view of some US human rights activists. Much of this excitement has to do with the work the Obama administration has done putting forward laws that allegedly further said rights. From expanding the legal scope of “hate crimes” to include those attacked as a result of their sexual orientation, to repealing “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” (DADT), Obama has been deemed a favourite amongst mainstream gay and lesbian activists (HRC, 2011). Through producing exceptional narratives of the US as an advocate of gay and lesbian rights, the Obama administration has thus not only effectively erased America’s history of violence against LGBT individuals, but has also oversimplified this violence as one that can only be stopped through what many

activists deem to be neoliberal inclusion (Spade, 2011, p. 208).

In her book *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar develops the conceptual frame of “homonationalism” to understand how the mainstream lesbian and gay movement has not only stifled the more radical anti-neoliberal LGBT movements, but has also become an effective tool for the advancement of US imperialism. I will explore this theory by looking closely at the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act*, the 2011 repeal of DADT, and the recent growth in prominence of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) as one of the most important LGBT non-profit organizations in the US. What does the seemingly progressive organization HRC have to do with military violence overseas? What is the link between the Hate Crimes Act and the increase of military spending? In addition to addressing these questions, I will provide an overall analysis of how the incorporation of gay rights into the US national discourse has governed US citizens into believing that they have not only the right, but the responsibility to propagate their values and beliefs overseas.

Homonationalism

Homonationalism describes the contemporary racial and economic relations in western sexual rights discourses, and explains the global narratives around sexual human rights, immigration, freedom and democracy. Natalie Kouri-Towe explains how it functions similarly to Orientalism:

“Homonationalism functions in complementary ways to Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, which describes how the West produces knowledge and dominates ‘the Orient’ through academic, cultural and discursive processes. Like Orientalism, [it] speaks to the ways Western powers circulate ideas about other cultures (like Arab and Islamic cultures) in order to produce the West as culturally, morally, and politically advanced and superior. However, unlike Orientalism, homo-

nationalism speaks particularly to the way gender and sexual rights discourses become central to contemporary forms of Western hegemony". (Kouri-Towe, 2012)

Thus through sexual rights discourses, the US has been able to construct itself as a progressive and morally superior nation in relation to countries with different, more discriminatory laws and legislation towards their LGBT citizens. Since the US grants its lesbian and gay citizens some measure of legal rights (however uneven), government leaders such as Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton feel that they are entitled to denounce the anti-gay laws in countries such as Russia, Uganda, or Senegal. It is important to interrogate how this arrogance comes to be justified, because arguably the individuals still among the most vulnerable to violence within the US are those who fall under the LGBT umbrella (Spade, 2011, p. 89). Therefore, how could the country's leaders possibly declare themselves to be leaders of this movement? The narrative of homonationalism also operates as a script that normalizes the homosexual as a white, cisgendered subject (Puar, 2007, p. 48). That is, this narrative's focus on the affluent white gay man as the central body in the movement, effectively displaces the queer "ethnic," and the violence inflicted upon them.

If gay rights movements incorporate individuals into a system such as neoliberalism, it must be understood that this system, in practice, operates on the accumulation of capital through dispossession (Harvey, 2003, p. 137). In other words, neoliberalism is a system that ultimately operates on the marginalization and exploitation of others, for the benefit of an elite class. This provides some insight into how the inclusion of LGBT people into neoliberal structures only benefits a select few. Those less likely to benefit from gay marriage, for example, would be lower class individuals, *trans* individuals, or racialized individuals with limited opportunities (Spade, 2011, p. 81). Therefore, LGBT rights narratives in the US produce representations of the gay citizen as white, middle class,

and often, male, because they are the easiest to incorporate. Ultimately, this disqualifies “racial others” from the homonational imaginary (Puar, 2007, p. 48).

Human Rights Campaign and the Construction of Just Gay Subjects

Founded in 1980 as a relatively small political action committee, the HRC fund was initially developed to raise money for gay-supportive congressional members in the US (Encarnación, 2014). It has since become the largest civil rights organization in America that advocates for the rights of its LGBT citizens, with its reach extending well beyond the country’s borders. In 2011, HRC endorsed Obama for re-election (HRC, 2011). This was not only a testament to their faith in his administration’s ability to create positive change for LGBT citizens at home, but also demonstrated their strong belief in the US’ responsibility to protect LGBT rights around the world. Amongst the administration’s alleged victories for LGBT rights outlined in the HRC’s official endorsement, the Obama administration was applauded for having added the US to a UN General Assembly resolution calling for an end to criminal penalties based on sexual orientation or gender identity (HRC, 2011). Further, HRC recognized the administration’s support for the first ever UN Human Rights Council resolution condemning violence and discrimination against LGBT people (HRC, 2011). Since Obama’s re-election, with support from HRC, the US continues to grant itself legitimacy in its role to fight LGBT inequalities across the globe.

On March 22, 2014, Vice-president Joe Biden was the keynote speaker at a HRC gala in Los Angeles. In this speech he asserted LGBT rights should be a vital part of US foreign policy (HRC, 2014, March 22), in which he also denounced cultural differences around this issue:

“The single most basic of all human rights is the right to decide who you love....It is the single most important

human right that exists...and hate, hate can never, never be defended because it's a so called cultural norm. I've had it up to here with cultural norms".

There are two concepts from this quote that require some interrogation. Firstly, Biden's myopic use of the term "cultural norms" fails to account for cultures that have been stunted, robbed or shaped in some way by legacies of colonial power and imperialism. For example, he makes a point to shame Uganda for their laws that punish people for "aggravated homosexuality," but conveniently omits the fact that these laws have been passed in large part due to groups of evangelical Christians from the US, who have been working with politicians and religious leaders in Uganda to promote the passing of these laws (Kaoma, 2012). Moreover, despite all this, Biden at no point scrutinizes the US for its cultural norms. He refers to the legal discrimination that still occurs against LGBT Americans as "barbaric" acts, but does not trace them back to America's longstanding culture of heteronormativity. Secondly, by defining LGBT rights as the "right to decide who you love," Biden removes LGBT identities from its intersections with race, gender, class, and ethnicity, and reduces it solely to a matter of sexual preference.

In *Terrorist Assemblages*, Puar draws from Miranda Joseph's theory of analogic inclusion to critique the ways in which gay and lesbian rights discourses have framed sexuality as something not only separate from race, but as "a form of minoritization parallel to ethnicity and race" (Puar, 2007, p. 118). In reasoning that civil rights have already been bestowed upon people of colour, Puar suggests that mainstream gays and lesbians have ultimately relieved themselves of the duty to incorporate any form of critical race or anti-racist critique into their agenda (Puar, 2007, p. 118; see also Puar, 2008). HRC specifically is not a group exempt from reproducing narratives of the "just gay" citizen. However it is worth considering that a mainstream LGBT movement with a strong emphasis on intersectionality would be of little interest to the US

government, considering its recent and well-documented reliance on the LGBT movement for fuelling its racist war machine.

Producing Exceptional Narratives of Citizenship

In 2009, after tireless lobbying by the HRC, Barack Obama signed into law the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act* (2009). A response to the horrific killing of Matthew Shepard, this act expanded on the 1960 US federal hate crime law to include crimes prompted by a victim's sexual orientation, gender identity, or disability (US Senate, 2009). It aimed to protect LGBT rights by providing millions of dollars to enhance police and prosecutorial resources (Spade, 2011, p. 89). This law, however, was also the rider to the controversial *National Defense Authorization Act* for the fiscal year of 2010, an act that had authorized \$680 billion for the Pentagon in the fiscal year 2010, making it the largest military budget ever (Martin, 2009/10/30). Therefore when people were rallying around what they considered to be the advancement of gay civil rights in the US, they were also rallying around increased US military spending, as well as military expansion overseas (US Senate, 2009).

In reference to the *Hate Crimes Prevention Act*, Dean Spade questions how the veterans of stonewall and Compton's cafeteria uprisings against police violence would feel about an act that provides millions of dollars to police and prosecutorial resources (Spade, 2011, p. 89), to the extent that this Act effectively erases the state's role as a perpetrator of this violence. At the reception commemorating the enactment of the *Hate Crimes Prevention Act*, Barack Obama made the following statement:

"We have for centuries strived to live up to our founding ideal, of a nation where all are free and equal and able to pursue their own version of happiness. Through conflict and tumult, through the morass of

hatred and prejudice, through periods of division and discord we have endured and grown stronger and fairer and freer. And at every turn, we've made progress not only by changing laws, but by changing hearts, by our willingness to walk in another's shoes, by our capacity to love and accept even in the face of rage and bigotry". (White House, 2009/10/28)

This history that Obama produces is one in which the US has stood in exception to such acts of "rage and bigotry," and further, continues to prevail in times when "hatred and prejudice" rear their ugly heads. Thus the discourse put forward is not only one that individualizes acts of oppressive violence, but one that also constructs them as something that exists only as an exception within the US. Further, the US is not only exceptional in the rights it bestows upon its citizens, but is in a state of exception whereby extreme measures of the state are justifiable in that it seeks to protect their exceptional citizens.

At a time when the American public was becoming more and more disillusioned with their country's role in allegedly "spreading democracy" in countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq (Agiesta & Cohen, 2009/8/20), the passing of the *Hate Crimes Prevention Act* gave Americans an opportunity to rally around their dedication as a nation to protecting the human rights of every individual. The fact that it also masked details of the US' contentious military budget for 2010 was simply an added bonus. The timing of the passing of this law, as well as its role as a rider to the *National Defence Authorization Act* should not be considered a mere coincidence.

On December 22, 2010, the Obama administration repealed DADT (HRC, 2011/10/20). DADT was a policy instituted by the Clinton administration in 1994, which essentially banned lesbians and gays from openly serving in the military. In repealing the policy, Obama was hailed by LGBT activists for his clear stance on advancing LGBT rights in the US. Unsurprisingly, HRC was at the forefront of campaigning for the repeal of this policy, working zealously for public support. With the support of government

liaisons, they constructed it as the civil rights issue of this generation, a fairly troubling notion considering the state-inflicted violence that is still meted out to marginalized peoples within the US who supposedly have already been allotted their civil rights. Ultimately this repeal relied entirely on the framing of the matter as one of civil rights. Here the use of liberal ideological gambits is crucial for masking the fact that the policy repeal is first and foremost one that allows more people to become both perpetrators and victims of imperial violence. During the special ceremony for the repeal, Obama shared the following anecdote:

“As one special operations warfighter said during the Pentagon’s review – this was one of my favourites: We have a gay guy in the unit. He’s big, he’s mean, he kills lots of bad guys. No one cared that he was gay. And I think that sums up perfectly the situation”. (White House, 2010/12/22)

Here Obama reproduces the narrative Puar spoke of that suggests the other must be killed in order for American life to be valorized. Similar to the *Hate Crimes Act*, the repealing of DADT could be read as an opportunity to rally around the US and its military at a time when its role in Afghanistan was under heavy scrutiny, to say the least. Effectively, it acted as a giant PR campaign to remind the world that the US does stand for freedom, equality, and justice, thus legitimizing their role in spreading democracy abroad, even if in the figure of “warfighters” of the kind that perpetrated night raids in Afghanistan that killed scores of civilians.

Lesbian and Gay Subjects on the Right Side of History

In March 2014, a letter was sent to Barack Obama by a coalition of civil and human rights groups requesting a meeting with senior administration officials to discuss the

human rights violations of LGBT people in countries such as Nigeria, Uganda and Russia (Gregg, 2014/3/14). As reported by the HRC, the recommendations included:

“Reprogramming aid away from discriminating governments to civil society organizations that are committed to proven evidence-and rights-based intervention; using the full weight of US diplomatic weight to press countries to repeal anti-LGBT laws; and providing on-the-ground training protection and support to people put at risk because of anti-LGBT laws or harassment. These recommendations are carefully crafted to ensure that the people who most need foreign assistance are not punished for the actions of leaders who are standing on the wrong side of history”. (Gregg, 2014/3/14)

The rhetorical device of “the wrong side of history,” used here by an HRC blogger, constructs a dichotomy between the civilized and the backward, or more historically speaking, the European and the non-European. Specifically, this dichotomy is posited by narratives produced through international law (Philipose, 2008, p. 105). Most of the laws objected to by the HRC are in direct violation of international human rights law (Amnesty International [AI], 2013/12/20). It is important to note here the extent to which the US, and other imperial nations, has historically relied on international law to justify the interventions, annexations, occupations, and sanctions of non-western territories. Thus it is a tool used for the purpose of incorporating the “uncivilized” into modernity (Philipose, 2008, p. 108).

Philipose indicates that one of the factors involved in being considered civilized in the eyes of international law is determined by one’s sexuality and self-regulating capacity to be sexually appropriate (Philipose, 2008, p. 111). Therefore it is unsurprising how international law has been preoccupied with the prosecution of rape as a weapon of war (Philipose, 2008, p. 112). She states further:

“The opportunity to construct a war zone as a place of sexual deviance reflects a colonial impulse that mobilizes international law to justify armed intervention, foreign occupation, incarceration, criminal trials and the use of torture against those who came to be understood as sexual deviants”. (Philipose, 2008, p. 112)

This sexual deviance Philipose refers to, once solely associated with queerness, has progressed to also encompass those who are portrayed as monstrous by association of “hypertrophied heterosexuality” (Puar, 2007, p. 38). Those who oppose gay rights are thus constructed as barbaric misogynists.

In his keynote speech at the HRC gala, Joe Biden quoted Andrei Sakharov saying, “a country that does not respect the rights of its citizens will not respect the rights of its neighbours” (HRC, 2014, March 22). This quote was made in direct reference to Russia and its military intervention in Ukraine. Biden creates a direct link between Russia’s failure to adhere to international law and protect LGBT rights with its failure to be a diplomatic country. That is not to suggest there cannot be links between the two, but rather to suggest that this dichotomy of diplomatic and non-diplomatic countries is overly simplistic and relies heavily on another country being constructed as sexually deviant, so that the one may define oneself in relation to it as superior.

Conclusion

Angela Davis notes that in order to dismantle US imperialism, it is important not to view peace as merely the cessation of war. The anti-imperialist battle is not one that looks toward only an end goal, but rather is one that engages constantly in a critique of the methodologies it deploys (Davis, 2008, p. 22). Thus to view struggles against imperialism as one separate from struggles against patriarchy,

heteronormativity, colonialism, and white supremacy, would be a mistake.

A few years prior to the US invasion of Afghanistan, American liberal feminists had begun mobilizing to “save” the Afghan women living under the Taliban. While much of this mobilization was laced with good intentions and anti-war sentiments, it produced a narrative of the Afghan woman as someone who needed to be saved from her culture, and thus produced Afghan cultures as monolithic, backward cultures that needed to be corrected. The issue was largely that women were organizing on the basis of a global sisterhood: “the abstract spiritual solidarity often based on scarce knowledge of the actual conditions of and absence of real relationships with the ‘other’” (Arat-Koc, 2002, p. 128). Arguably a similar thing is occurring within the field of LGBT activism.

By reducing queer identities to one’s sexual preference or gender identity, one effectively erases the ways in which systems of colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy shape how one experiences queer identities. It is not enough to direct the gaze onto countries with repressive laws towards their LGBT citizens. Rather, we must reverse the gaze, and be critical of the ways in which we, as westerners, are complicit in continuing legacies of colonialism and imperialism, and that these cannot be removed from the promotion of LGBT rights.

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