

# Troubling the Nation: Crafting the New Gay in a Post 9/11 Environment

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In the years following September 11, 2001, the United States witnessed drastic shifts in the politics of belonging to the nation. This generated a heightened sense of nationalism that was inclined to reject brown-skinned peoples, and simultaneously coincided with an increased push for “gay rights.” This created an intersection of sexuality and citizenship that operated to redefine notions of queerness within the United States. As a result, what emerged at this point in time was a unique national and cultural project that we will refer to throughout this paper as “crafting the new gay.” Through the use of the phrase “crafting the new gay” as a nationalist project of modernity, we wish to reference the similarly structured project set forth in 1998 in Afseneh Najmabadi’s “Crafting an Educated Housewife in Iran.”<sup>1</sup> This project by the state of “crafting the new gay” sought to incorporate certain queer bodies into the nation as a marker of modernity. In our exploration of this narrative created by the nation, we set forth to answer the following questions: since belonging to the nation was redefined, how were certain bodies brought in at the same time that other bodies were pushed out? Furthermore, how did this reorganization within the state of bodies perpetuate U.S. exceptionalism, both from a national and transnational standpoint? In this paper, we will argue that the U.S. in the post 9/11 era proliferated fear and anxiety in regards to the presence of brown and specifically Muslim bodies, and in turn replaced those bodies with homonormative subjects who were deemed to be more valuable to the nation at this point in time. This was accomplished in part through the privileging and prioritizing of the “rights” of white, gay bodies while simultaneously neglecting the hostile environment directed at brown bodies. White U.S. homosexuals were selectively marketed to represent the embrace of progressive sexual politics, with the intent to foster heightened patriotic sentiments designed to recover the American nation’s mental and economic health. Modalities of consumerism, media representations, and legislation were deployed to help generate the acceptance of homonormative subjects under the guise of modernity.

We will build our case through an exploration of what belonging to the nation means by critiquing the selective manner in which the status of citizenship was simultaneously bestowed on some and denied to others, perpetuating the discourse of “us versus them” by privileging bodies and feelings that align with the nation’s ideals and excluding other bodies and feelings labeled as sources of fear or threats to the state. Through this selective inclusion, the U.S. created a narrative of progression, modernity, and “gay-friendliness” that is used to “otherize” nations which Western ideals portray as backward and homophobic. However, the queer subjects embraced and celebrated by the nation were exclusively white, gay males who represented normative standards of class and race. Although this phenomenon created a façade of acceptance, there continues to be repercussions for non-hegemonic members of the queer community as well as brown and Muslim bodies that have been systematically excluded.

## Selective Citizenship

When examining the political workings behind welcoming queer bodies into the nation’s hegemony, there were extreme constraints put on this acceptance in order to adhere to the “ideal citizen” model developed by the state, resulting in conformity to the state’s identity. The acceptance of normative, white, cisgender bodies occurred through their own assimilation and the othering of Muslim and brown bodies. This transformed these undesirable brown bodies into the new target of the nation, enabling a platform for certain queer bodies to gain support within the nation after the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror that soon followed. In the words of feminist theorist Jasbir Puar, even though “patriotism during the post 9/11 crisis was inextricably tied to a reinvigoration of heterosexual norms for Americans, progressive sexuality was championed as a hallmark of US modernity.”<sup>2</sup> These seemingly progressive sexual politics were presented as the new marker of national identity.

Stemming from 9/11, we saw the creation of entities such as Homeland Security, which only further entrenched a national dialogue of “us versus them.” The central focus of

this nationalist narrative was on protecting the United States from “terrorism,” which was newly identified as being embodied by brown and Muslim subjects. In the post 9/11 era, Islamophobia came to replace homophobia as a primary marker of national otherness. This was an interesting shift that occurred within the national script of belonging, whereby white gay bodies were conferred the legitimacy of citizenship, and in turn they were expected to uphold a commitment to capitalist consumption as a patriotic duty to help uplift the nation.<sup>3</sup> It is in the context of this shift that we begin to witness the commodification of specific gay bodies with the intent to restore the nation’s financial wellbeing. Gay subjects were now seen as the repositories of modernity and progressive politics within the United States.

In addition, the state’s recognition and validation of normative, gay citizens is accomplished through the manipulation and promotion of feelings that align with the state’s agenda of “us versus them.” As part of this agenda, the nation portrays brown and Muslim bodies as objects of fear that pose a threat to the nation and its citizens. Stemming from this xenophobia, the nation supported this blatant racism by only addressing the emotions of white bodies. This simultaneously disregarded and dismissed the fears of subaltern subjects who were facing an increasingly violent response to their existence by being labeled as outsiders of the nation. In the narrative of fear perpetuated by the state, not only were brown bodies seen as targets, but white citizens were also expected to engage in “a strategy of ‘governing through neurosis’ in which the ‘neurotic citizen’ was encouraged to have a number of anxieties, including ‘about the Other.’”<sup>4</sup> In this way, the feelings of the “neurotic citizen” (anxious white bodies) were validated, and in some instances, applauded by the state.

This selective engagement of emotions between the citizen and the state created larger agency for those recognized as ideal citizens, further bolstering the imperialist and dominating identity of the United States. It is important to consider that homonationalism is not exclusive to the nation, but is a product of U.S. imperialism that has spread far beyond

Western borders. The process of bolstering the state's status of sovereignty and progress (or illusion thereof) through the presence of selective homosexual acceptance and rights created benefits for the state. This tactical inclusion of previously marginalized subjects works to distract attention from the nation's perpetuation of settler colonialism, racism, acts of war, and so on, under the guise of sexual modernity. As stated by Sara Ahmed in her discussion of gay imperialism, "it is as if there is a script that is written in advance; it is as if the very point of the script is to block the critique of racism from getting through."<sup>5</sup> This inclusion of white, gay bodies is used to distract from the exclusion of brown, Muslim bodies.

Although the nation is including and excluding certain individuals from the nation, the individuals who are being excluded for the nation's gain are the same individuals who are creating action against this dynamic. Agency can be seen within theorists who are supplying these essential works that spark the discussion around exploitation of Muslim individuals. Scholars such as Jasbir Puar, Sara Ahmed, and Chandan Reddy not only have been some of the first in illuminating these contradictions that exist within the politics of belonging, but they also have been extremely critical in its functioning and the danger it presents. We can find this in not only in the work of the theorists mentioned above, but also in organizations run by people of color like Against Equality, who are actively critiquing queer politics in the United States.

## Sexual Modernity and (Re)Imagining the Nation

Although the promotion of "gay marriage and gay-friendliness is fast becoming a marker of modernity, progress, and western liberalism,"<sup>6</sup> it can be viewed as a divergent tactic to what harmful acts the nation is endorsing. After 9/11, the United States boosted its commitment to capitalism and looked for subjects who could bolster capitalist consumption. Therefore, the white, cisgender, upper/middle class, gay male was targeted and given certain citizenship "rights" that they had been previously denied. With white gay male inclusion came marketing schemes and lines of products that ironically reinforced heteronormative ideals in the West. Monogamous marriage, for instance, was reinstalled as a foundational institution framing U.S. modernity. This normalization of monogamous gay marriage was absorbed into a wider capitalistic program as a way of imposing these Western ideas onto other nations. The inclusion of certain institutions, such as gay marriage, into the national discourse of belonging perpetuated the erasure of the violence and degradation

experienced within the border of the U.S. by subaltern queer subjects.

Puar asserts in her article, "Abu Ghraib: Arguing Against Exceptionalism," that the actual events that took place within the Bush administration did not reflect U.S. modernity. Puar writes, "as George W. Bush stated of the abuse at Abu Ghraib, days after the photographs had been circulating among foreign press: 'Their treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people'."<sup>7</sup> Puar argues that Bush's affirmation that American values are not "perverted" or capable of doing harm, are in fact fallacies he preached to citizens within national borders and to the wider global community. Ahluwalia makes a note that Western nations use gay politics to (re) present themselves as progressive in regards to sexual politics, which they accomplish by contrasting themselves with the "illiberated" other.<sup>8</sup> By marking the brown male body as effeminate and shamed, white, U.S., queer identities could then move from the national margins onto its center. In other words, the social acceptance of specific gay bodies, the internalization of Islamophobia, and the marginalization of non-hegemonic members of the queer community together enabled the promotion and advocacy of the U.S. being a "gay-friendly" nation.

## Diluting Queerness

It is important to understand what homonormativity is when describing the specific queer bodies that are welcomed into the nation. Originally, as articulated by Lisa Duggan, homonormativity is a set of "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption."<sup>10</sup> Within homonormativity, certain queer subjects are assimilated into the dominant characteristics of heteronormativity, only straying from these prescribed roles in that they are, in fact, homosexual subjects. Adherence to domesticity and capitalist consumption are foundational aspects of homonormativity; through domesticity and compliance with capitalist systems, certain queer subjects are able to conform to hegemonic standards of heteronormativity, thus normalizing and mainstreaming their queerness.

## Selling the New Gay

As definitions of citizenship have been broadened to include queer subjects, it is important to note that they represent homonormative notions which are predominantly white, gay, affluent,

cisgender males who are understood to be conventionally attractive within the dominant Western standard of beauty. These bodies are represented as ideal subjects both for consumption and as national citizens. Although queerness is vastly diverse, this homonormative subject eventually became the hegemonic representation of the queer community. According to GLAAD's *Where We Are 2015* report, only 4% of characters represented on television fall into the category of LGBT. Of this, only 28% of these characters are people of color; breaking this down 28% of the 142 characters leaves us with less than 40 characters representing queer people of color on mainstream television.<sup>11</sup> This homogenous identity of the queer community is constituted largely through marketing strategies, such as print ads and commercials. The last few years have witnessed an increase in corporations using queer bodies in their ads as a form of inclusion.<sup>12</sup> However, bodies largely represented in this marketing have been white, gay, affluent, cisgender males, as opposed to other subaltern queer subjects. Yet despite this lack of diversity, corporations continue to use queer bodies in their advertisements to tap into the queer consumer market and to expand their base for potential customers. According to Rivendell Media (2015), about 23 million dollars were spent on major ad categories in 2015.<sup>13</sup> Including queer (specifically normative queer) characters in advertisements promotes an image of modernity for the company without necessarily challenging institutional oppressions that some members of the queer community experience, and in some instances reinforcing subaltern exclusion. Two examples of such homonormative advertisements that we will discuss below are an Amazon Kindle commercial and a Miller Lite print ad.

This Amazon Kindle commercial shows a white man on the beach who is unable to read the book on his tablet because of a glare from the sun.<sup>14</sup> The white woman next to him informs him of the Amazon Kindle, which prevents glare, and he promptly buys the Kindle. To celebrate his new purchase, the man suggests that the two get drinks. The viewer is meant to believe that the man is attempting to be flirtatious, because the scene is read as a typical exchange between two heterosexual individuals within a dominant heteronormative society. In response, the woman claims her husband is getting her a drink in order to stop his advance. At the climax of the scene, the man states, "So is mine," and the camera pans over to show two men chatting at the bar. From the start, the gay bodies in the commercial are extremely underplayed and

their queerness is not revealed until the end. The representation of the two queer characters is also homonormative as they are both attractive, married, white, cisgender males who have enough disposable capital to buy a Kindle on a whim while vacationing at the beach. As white, gay males have the most agency within the queer community, they are able to expend the most financial resources to support the nation's capitalistic agenda. Therefore, these identities are selected as representatives of queerness within media advertisements.

In the 2012 Miller Lite print ad, there are again two white, attractive males who are drinking Miller Lite beers.<sup>15</sup> The man on the right has his arm around the other, as a large Miller Lite is seen in the background with the phrase "great to see you out" above it. The ad portrays an oversaturated image of white gay males. These men are presented as potential national citizens whose whiteness, masculinity, and class status are non-threatening to the nation. These men are also subscribing to hegemonic ideals of masculinity in the way they are dressed and consuming beer. This advertisement is not overtly expressing queerness; rather, it is letting the audience know of their supposed sexual orientation through a subtle notion (as if the advertisement is saying, "P.S. they're gay" despite their other normative markers). Another problematic aspect of this ad is that it reinforces the notion of 'coming out' as a typical or singular process in the queer experience. While some may claim that these advertisements are just an outlier, there has been much appreciation for these ads among some sections of the queer community. This Miller Lite ad was nominated by the GLAAD Media Awards in Advertising in 2010 for Outstanding Print Campaign, which demonstrates the support from the gay community as they claim this to be a progressive and "outstanding" ad.<sup>16</sup> However, reading this as an outstanding advertisement not only negates the heterogeneity within and among queer identified communities, but it also seeks to replace it with a homogenized and homonormative non-threatening image.

### Commodification & Co-optation of Queer Issues

Although media representations and advertisements contribute to the normalization of gay bodies, legislation and co-opting of queer issues also aid in the project of crafting the new gay under the façade of modernity. Specifically, the commodification and co-optation of the gay marriage movement restricts understandings of queer issues and severely limits the prominence of activism outside of these issues, portraying a singular homogeneous image of queer identity

politics. In the post 9/11 era, a capitalist push for national spending within borders was framed as an act of patriotism. As we have discussed with homonormativity, white, affluent, gay, cisgender males have become the face of the queer community. Gender, race, and class intersect to target white, middle class, gay males as ideal national capitalist consumers.

Therefore, gay marriage was commodified to target white males and to further perpetuate the idea of the nuclear family. There are multiple modalities through which gay marriage has been normalized into a consumeristic institution. Gay marriage has been co-opted by corporations and is used to create a specific image within the market, projecting it as a gateway into U.S. inclusivity. By spending money on products promoting gay marriage, one becomes a participant in the advancement of sexual modernity. A prime example of this could be seen through American Apparel's "Legalize Gay" products and advertisements, such as an advertisement featuring a young, white male wearing a shirt with the wording "Gay O.K."<sup>17</sup> The products that these heteronormative companies produce, along with the institution of marriage and its expenses, create a pathway for certain bodies to obtain agency within U.S. society. Gay marriages contribute to capitalism and have effectively halted queer activism and severely limited the understandings of queer issues. Since the legalization of gay marriage by the Supreme Court, the nation state can now claim that the fight for equality and inclusion is complete. In reality, this is not the case; violence is enacted every day against queer subjects inflicted through institutional homophobia and transphobia embedded within the justice, financial, and larger cultural systems.

Although advocating for same-sex marriage is not the only issue within queer communities, the push for marriage equality was seen as the main issue brought to mainstream society. Not all queer individuals desire to be married; however, desires for marriage equality by normative queer individuals appeal to the nation's ideals. The movement to secure same-sex marriage rights was predominantly advocated for by white, elite members of the queer community, and integrated into popular US discourse, despite being an issue with which many periphery groups within the queer community do not agree. As Chandan Reddy argues, the United States adopted the movement for marriage equality to replace previous civil rights movements in order to prove the nation's modernity. Specifically, Reddy writes of the passing of Proposition 8 in California:

This is a moment in which, as Foucault argues of modern power, the state originates from below--is appropriated by subaltern groups, no longer entirely or exclusively in subalternity, for their own interests. We are witnessing the possibilities of transnational public sources and cultural heterogeneities for remaking state power against both the neoliberal and the welfare state... This is not about rights, equality, or identity--it is about the speech of bodily groups that are the material foundations of the US nation-state.<sup>18</sup>

In Reddy's argument, certain subjects who advocated for Proposition 8 in California were able to appeal to the neoliberal state and further the image of same sex marriage as an issue relevant to all members of the queer community. Marriage equality was not the most imperative issue to all queer individuals; however, it was adopted by the nation state and by mainstream media because it aligns with other national ideals and has the largest potential to perpetuate the modernity of the United States.

### Current Acts of Queer Assimilation

In making definitive claims about the LGBT community and their budding relationship with the nation, it is necessary to locate movements within the community that not only assert normative gays as a member of the nation but also perpetuate American exceptionalism and Islamophobia, as these are markers of homonationalism. A current example of this is the amount of LGBT groups in support of Republican President-elect Donald Trump. These groups became quite vocal in the support of Trump after the attacks on Pulse night club in Orlando, as many of them claimed that Trump would be the best option to protect them for the threat of ISIS. As the former president of a gay conservative group, GOProud, Chris Barron claimed two days after the shooting: "I have no doubt that Donald Trump would be better for LGBT Americans, when we've got ISIS throwing gay people off of buildings, when we have Muslim states that are prescribing the death penalty for people who are gay, I would think this would be something that a friend of the LGBT community would be able to speak out on."<sup>19</sup> This statement illustrates the ways in which the nation and newly assimilated queer individuals use contrasting images against other nations to promote Western modernity. The concerns Barron mentions allow the United States to divert views of queer oppression in the nation, as Barron paints Muslim states as the most harmful force to queer bodies and the US nation as their Protectorate. Similar groups such as



LGBTrump-Gays for Trump have issued very similar homonationalist statements as seen in their bio: "As Americans from all walks of life listen to Trump's message of economic nationalism, American exceptionalism, and limited government, those of us in the LGBT community should start paying close attention," as well as their official statement on the night of Trump's victory, "Trump's victory tonight will usher in a new era of politics – an era in which your identity does not determine your ideology and an era in which the needs of the nation are placed before the needs of special interests."<sup>20</sup> These statements are directly calling for queer individuals to move their concerns beyond their queer identities in return for a national identity, as that is what would be most effective for the queer community. With said national identity these groups are calling for queer individuals to focus on issues threatening the nation rather than how the nation treats its queer individuals as the nation and its queers are one in the same now. Both Barron and gays for trump can serve as representations of how the new gay, which relies on assimilation, nationalism, islamophobia and heteronormativity is crafted in queer communities.

## Conclusion

In the years following 9/11, brown and Muslim bodies have become the target of collective racism and exclusion from the nation, while the state simultaneously adopts a guise of modernity through its inclusion of an idyllic homonormative citizen. This reorganization of citizenship allows the nation to "craft the new gay" and to promote US exceptionalism. This is accomplished by the state's endorsement of feelings of anxiety by its "neurotic citizens," while failing to recognize the emotions of and marginalization of non-white bodies. The inclusion and participation of certain gay subjectivities within the nation, dubbed as homonationalism by Puar, is achieved through the exclusion of marginalized groups from what constitutes an idealized and desirable neoliberal citizen.<sup>21</sup> Because of the link between capitalism and a neoliberal citizenry, print ads and commercials spell out and take on the nationalist agenda of "crafting the new gay" through normative representations of select queer subjects. In addition, the co-optation of issues, specifically the gay marriage movement, not only limits an understanding of what queer issues are, but also encourages the inclusion of homonormative subjects into the consumerist institution of marriage, providing an opportunity for ideal gay subjects to participate and further an exclusionary nationalist agenda. By crafting

this new gay citizen, the United States is able to position itself as culturally superior under the guise of sexual modernity.

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