



Diasporic Blaming, or the (Im)Possibility of Speaking

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I focus on online posts and hashtags circulated after the news that two lesbians were caned in Malaysia. I unpack some perhaps unintended consequences of speaking from the diaspora in relation to settler/orientalist homonationalism and imperialism. I ask what are the assumptions behind 'diasporic blaming'; in what ways does such blaming exceed or conform to the discursive limits of the transnational white settler nationalism; how do people like me who are from these 'backward' places think through and criticize such blaming and how can we critically engage with the imagined 'non-West' from the location of a settler colonial and anti-immigrant (especially queer refugees) nation-state known as Canada.

Content warning: the q word will be used as an act of reclaiming

This reflective essay unsettles the acts of blaming by members of the queer diaspora (Patton & Sánchez-Eppler, 2000); most specifically, the East/Southeast Asian queer diaspora, defined as those who have grown up in a Western country. I focus on online posts and hashtags circulated after the news that two lesbians were caned in Malaysia. I am particularly interested in the narrative of emotional posts by some queer Malaysian-descendants. I unpack some perhaps unintended consequences of speaking from the diaspora in relation to settler/orientalist homonationalism and imperialism (Kinsman, 2001; Puar, 2007; Morgensen, 2010a, p. 106; Gentil & Kinsman, 2015). I ask what are the assumptions behind 'diasporic blaming'; in what ways does such blaming exceed or conform to the discursive limits of the transnational white settler nationalism (Day, 2007, p. 81); how do people like me who are from these 'backward' places think through and criticize such blaming and how can we critically engage with the imagined 'non-West' from the location of a settler colonial and anti-immigrant (especially queer refugees) nation-state known as Canada.

Caned, Circulated, Criticized

Earlier this September, multiple people across major social media sites started to post and voice their oppositions to the court decision to can a lesbian couple in a Northern province in Malaysia (Lamb, 2018). This homophobic and oppressive act angered many who live in



the queer Southeast Asian diaspora. On social media, I traced many who hashtagged and posted phrases such as 'Malaysia Disgrace'. Many high-profile accounts such as UN Watch, Amnesty International and the New York Times all circulated this piece of news, followed by a sheer volume of comments that shamed the court and the government. However, what I found particularly interesting in these posts is the lack of context. In fact, since as early as August, the Malaysian government has been tightening its control on LGBTQ venues and cultures (Ellis-Peterson, 2018). Not only did many of these posts fail to mention the continuation of oppressive policies, but also they excluded detailed analysis of the broader national political change in May this year, the battle between the new and the previous government and the complexities of religions.

My essay does not delve into these complicated dynamics, what I would like to map out is the online and indeed offline discursive construction of Malaysia as 'a disgrace' or a 'homophobic' space. If *homonationalism is a project initiated on the part of settler Whites to defend Western nations in the name of promoting queer rights*, then the practice of blaming is a project facilitated by the diasporic queers who feel obliged to speak out on behalf of the Native. I call this a '*diasporic blaming project*' that serves to regulate the *sedimented population (queer, non-white settlers) who are previously unfolded into the settler nationalist project*. In the following pages, I investigate the rationale behind the diaspora's ability and desire to criticize and the ways in which these practices may foreclose more radical and transformational shifts in Canada and beyond.

The Political Unconsciousness of *Diasporic Speaking*

For Marxist philosopher Fredric Jameson, one of the important reasons to study culture textually is to reveal its political unconscious narrative that reflects the absolute horizon of all readings and interpretations (Jameson, 1983, pp. 1-2). These online posts not only render those who are immigrants uncomfortable and unable to speak on their own terms but also reveal the political unconsciousness of the authors of these comments and reposts. Indeed, in a collection of essays, the cultural critic Rey Chow has warned us that the Native is rendered occasional when speaking from the diaspora (Chow, 1993, pp.27-54). Those of us who reside outside of many LGBTQ-repressive places tend to assume that because of certain intimacies around race and ethnicity, we can speak on behalf of those who are actually being affected by the brutality as if we secure our rights and agencies to speak by taking away those of the Native. Such a 'presumption' unearths the modality of internalized colonial, racial and gendered social relations.



The first layer of these social relations is the continuations of the colonial binary that remains influential to our ways of knowing and means of rationality. Blaming Malaysia, for example, entails the dialectic construction of *the Other* of Malaysia; that is, a 'better' and queer positive place. While insofar as this construction is completed within post-colonial social relations, it inevitably grabs holds of coloniality (Lowe, 2015, p. 137) that advances global racialized and gendered organization of people that critical race theorist de Silva termed 'globality' (de Silva, 2007, p. 29). Put in another way, the discursive blaming does not sufficiently challenge the very Malaysian institution that criminalizes queer desires, it does more to serve as a kind of 'political branding' (Clough & Willse, 2011, p. 57) for Western liberalism and colonial ideologies. That is, it confirms the conventional imaginaries of East/Southeast Asia as places of unfreedom and North America as the spaces of liberation. In this process, the liberal notion of liberty, developed by Anglo-Saxon political theorists, is rendered as the referent, as the sole possible interpretation of human emancipation (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 28). Places like Malaysia, Indonesia, China or South Korea are oftentimes labelled as teleologically lacking sexual enlightenment in the European sense of the word. Queer Asian diasporas thus become subjects that embody sexual enlightenment, liberal freedom and progression, making colonialism, capitalism and exploitation in Asia invisible.

Diasporic blaming furthermore conceals the structured social relations of global capitalism that has been co-opting queer identity as a strategy to advance its agenda (Rushbrook, 2002; Jackson, 2009; Floyd, 2009). This strategy, termed 'the global homocapitalist project' (Rao, 2015), has been quite successful. For peripheral countries such as Malaysia, the impact of the global capitalist regime has disadvantaged the majority of the population while enriching the few. The material precarity experienced by ordinary Third-World population has been implicated by the wider structural relations that directly or indirectly complicate 'moral panic'. Here, I suspect that the increasing need for money making greatly limits individual's actualization to live up to their moral standard, be that of religious or secular. This imbrication of money and morality has been in fact observed in many places (Rao, 2015, p. 46), which has indoctrinated an emphasis on the 'traditions' as an instrument to counter the utilitarian and monetary rationality engendered by the globalization of capital. The rise of New-Confucius in China, the growing of Hindu nationalism in India, the branding of 'Asian values' by many Southeast Asian countries and 'African Values' in (post)colonial Africa can be understood as mobilizing cultural-mediated power to quell dissatisfactions felt by the poor (Bannerji, Mojab, & Whitehead, 2010). In this sense,



homosexuality, manipulated by major financial institutions such as the International Money Fund or the World Bank, comes to signify the ill of capitalism (monetary desires) and the threat brought by Western companies, white people as well as Western human rights organizations. For instance, SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) has become a prominent development concerns for the IMF and WB in terms of funding and lobbying governments in the Global South (Gosine, 2010).

Such blaming also can potentially displace the Native's resistance. This is especially evident in the case of caning because the majority of the posts leave no trace of organizations that are fighting against oppression in Malaysia whereby alternative queer practices are rendered unthinkable and invisible (Luibhéid, 2008, p. 182). As a matter of fact, the critique is directed mainly towards the government and the Sharia Law; while the tension is converted to that of Islam vis-à-vis non-Islam. The transcontinental circuit of information helps to regulate what types of news are circulatable, profitable and perhaps 'sentimental' enough. For the diaspora to talk for the Native is not only the 'translation of movements' but also the reinforcement of the colonial and imperialistic expropriations of race, gender and sexuality. Hence, diasporic blaming may as well be understood as the white homosexuals, assisted by the diasporic queers, saving brown, black and yellow homosexuals from the heterosexuals (Puar, 2017, p. 99).

Settler Homonationalism, Homo-imperialism and Bill-C31

In this section, I attempt to engage with what can be called the formation of American/Canadian studies with International Area Studies, venturing through queer positionality (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001, p. 669). By problematizing the logic of online responses in the previous part, I can now begin thinking through how the structural relations of capitalism, settler/franchised colonialism and imperialism in North America generally and Canada more specifically is interlocked with the global making of 'cosmopolitan queer subjects' that many of us diasporic queers inhabit.

To elaborate, the very ability to leave one's homeland exemplifies a set of relations that Malaysian anthropologist Ong termed 'graduated citizenship', which refers to the differentiated management of population that aims to maximize the productivity of those, under a neoliberal context, are deemed to be more profitable (Ong, 2006, pp. 78-9). Valuable to the global/national production of capital, diaspora population is folded into the settler colonialist project. Speaking from Asian migrant experiences, cultural critics such as



Ikyo Day, Grace Hong, Jodi Kim, Mimi Thi Nguyen and ChandanReddy have demonstrated that the post-racial discourse of multiculturalism relegates the contemporary exploitation of Asian technocratic labour and historical railway constructors intangible (Kim, 2010; Reddy, 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Hong, 2015; Day, 2016). Yet, I argue that diasporic queers seem to be excluded by this white heteropatriarchal settler nationalist project. The effort to 'include' the queer diaspora, then, is channelled through the settler homonationalist construction of 'proper/respective middle-class queers' and the homo-imperialist rendering of 'good/bad' queer migrants/refugees. The 'bad' ones fail to demonstrate their multicultural value and thus are not rescuable. Contrary to the branding of 'universalized human rights', countries like Canada, in reality, only select queer refugees with certain narratives and values while leaving other queers unattended to. For us already 'freed' queers to question post-colonial governments such as that of Malaysia, we embrace the homo-imperialist and settler homonationalist reinforcements of the Canadian nation-state.

Much literature has been written on sexuality, Indigeneity and settler homonationalism (Smith, 2005; Rifkin, 2006; Morgensen, 2010a, p. 106; Morgensen; 2010b). Both feminist and queer scholarships have analyzed the subordination of indigenous people through sexuality. Most notably, in literature academic Schneider's work, Indigenous people were branded as practicing sodomy and thus queer hating and Indian hating became parallel acts of violence (Schneider, 2007). A settler homonationalist project, therefore, works to disremember and disarticulate indigenous dispossessions. Yet settler homonationalism has also been closely connected with homoimperialist practices, which are my main problematization in the consecutive pages.

Homoimperialism is perceived as the expanding of economic and political power and domination from the Global North to the South through the rhetoric of queer liberation. It advances homonationalist agenda by conceptualizing the North as the height of liberal humanity, freedom and rights whereby the consequences of colonialism, militarism and capitalism are occluded. Meanwhile, homoimperialism frames capital's need for labour as 'escaping' to sites of freedom. However, only certain kinds of queers are accepted.

Perhaps the most recent imperialist policy by the Canadian government is the Bill C-31. Put into place in 2012, this bill is decidedly anti-immigrant and is intended to create barriers for people from the Global South to migrant into settler Canada. Under Bill-C31, persons who arrive 'irregularly' are classified as designed foreign nationals(DFNs); many of them cannot claim refugee status and stay in Canada. The increased use of detention and denial of



refugee claimants deter those who come to Canada ‘illegally’ while encouraging those who come ‘legally’ (Envisioning, 2014, pp. 13-15). For queer refugees, a new invention is particularly imperialistic: designated country of origin (DCO). Countries on this list are said to have ‘safe’ environment and fewer possibilities of persecutions. Yet in some of these countries, such as Mexico, anti-queer violence still persists and amplifies. Claimants from DCOs have fewer chances to become refugees as well as fewer times to have their documents reviewed (Kinsman, 2018, p. 119), meaning that ‘rescuable’ queers need to adhere to the dichotomy of oppression/freedom and backward/progressive.

It is in this sense that the imperialist authority has the ‘right’ to organize world populations and spaces, to manipulate queerness as a marker of white supremacy and to decide which racialized queer subjects enter/exit the Canadian settler state. Therefore, without concurrently interrogating homophobic border imperialism, questioning anti-queer policies elsewhere from the localities of the queer diaspora runs the risk of projecting the white state as the culturally imperialist authority of ‘queerness’ on the postcolonial map whereas those violent conditions against queers in supposedly ‘positive’ spaces are occluded. In this process, the settler state is able to concretize its colonial sovereignty constantly through the production of differentiated identities and to continue its economic advantages via the importing of multicultural, educated and valuable migrants instead of queers under repressions.

Everyone’s Protest Post

I have consistently argued that a large number of online posts after the caning of lesbians are potentially beneficial for the settler homonationalist and homo-imperialist project because the constitutive logic of colonialism, capitalism and imperialism remains pivotal to our ways of knowing and our own epistemological boundaries. However, I am not disputing the will to criticize; in fact, I think the queer diasporas have to question. To return to the complication I highlight at the outset of this essay, the possibility of speaking becomes the question of how do we challenge post-colonial governments with a critical consciousness of the structural. I thus offer a few suggestions as to where do we begin shifting our narratives.

Most importantly, we need to call for free borders. We cannot pretend that Canadian settler state is progressive. Its protection of queers is accommodational insofar as the heterosexual conceptions of the family is insufficiently challenged (Duggan, 2003). Its branding of LGBTQ rights around the world is utilitarian not only because it has never been truly



‘friendly’ to queer refugees as Bill C-31 suggests but also because queerness becomes a speculative value to be extracted (Hong, 2018, p. 110). If we are true queerly internationalists, then we would have to ensure that all queers can live lives that are consistent to their most intimate realities.

Second, we need to disrupt the ‘leaving as liberating’ narrative in many queer migration stories by critically reflecting on our own conceptualizations of queerness in the neoliberal, homonormative and homonationalist framework. Simultaneously, we have to go beyond the analytic of the discursive to delineate the capitalist social relations that condition the global understanding of queerness whereby to ‘leave’ is to experience restructured inequality and opportunities as a result of the global circulation of value and capital (Manalansan, 2003).

Equally important is that we need an alternative framework that escapes the discourse of value and worth in neoliberalism. That is, we need to build grounded rationalities. We need to think about ‘here and now’ because the kind of solidarity and relations we establish would have an impact on the structural systems that influence us all. I think there is a need to further works by indigenous scholars Glen Coulthard, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Taiaiake Alfred and Jodi A. Byrd to literally *ground* queer politics on the indigenous land we reside. Coevally we as diasporic queers ought to redirect our activist energy from an incident-based and reactionary organizing to a structurally-informed and long-term oriented mobilization. For instance, instead of criticizing the government for caning online, it might also be helpful to connect with local queer organizations and offer assistance of any kind.

In *Everyone’s Protest Novel*, James Baldwin argues that classic protest novels only incite sentimental reforms that do not question the institutional conditions of racism. I suspect online posts have become the modern-day protest novels that enable white supremacy to venture through a formally anti-racist, queer-positive and rational apparatus (Melamed, 2011). This white supremacy has established a global racial project that designates white-majority spaces as the climax of rationality and freedom while relegates racialized geolocalities as the ‘lagging’ of Enlightened humanity. Existing as the minority in the presumably ‘rational’ locales, we diasporic queers perhaps need to examine our complicities and vulnerabilities in the global structure of racialized imperialism and (settler)colonialism. Moreover, we have to remember that to stigmatize one form of humanity (racialized Third-World, poor) is to advance another’s health and development (Global North, including us as valuable subjects to racial capitalism) (Singh, 2003, p. 223). We thus have to remember



those deaths on the continent where our ancestors have left their histories; but most crucially, we need to think about those whose modes of existences we have been required to disinherit so that we can live on.

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