

## CHAPTER 2

### Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror'

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Suddenly everybody wants a piece of the Paki pie.  
(Jaheda Choudhury, Out of Place conference, 25 March 2006)

How do we explain the new omnipresence of (some) queers of colour?<sup>1</sup> Muslim gays and lesbians have received their debut in TV programmes, newspaper articles, research projects and political events. At first sight, this development is new and welcome. It breaks with the imposed silence of those who have traditionally fallen out of the simple representational frames of a single-issue identity politics. Other queers of colour, however, continue to lack a public voice. Moreover, as Leslie Feinberg (2006) observes, the interest in Muslim gays and lesbians has emerged from a global context of violent Islamophobia. This raises the question of which stories are being circulated and how they contest or reinforce racism. It is also questionable what interest other actors have in this new politics of queer of colour representation, notably white gays, lesbians, feminists and queers.

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<sup>1</sup> We use 'queer' as an umbrella term for coalitions between people of various marginalised gender and sexual identities. We are aware of the traps of this usage. First, it is increasingly equated with 'gay'. Mirroring this gay assimilationism, it is homophobia rather than transphobia or sex-work phobia which is most interesting to current imperialist subjectivities. This is also why gay Muslims, rather than transgender or sex-working Muslims, are at the centre of this debate. The second problem with queer, which we explore in this article, is that many queers identify as anti- or post-identity and hence outside of racism and other power relations.

Our article focuses on the situation in Britain, where ‘Muslim’ and ‘homophobic’ are increasingly treated as interchangeable signifiers. The central figure in this process is Peter Tatchell who has successfully claimed the role of the liberator of and expert about Muslim gays and lesbians. This highlights the problems of a single politics of representation, which equates ‘gay’ with white and ‘ethnic minority’ with heterosexual. At the same time, the fact that Tatchell’s group *Outrage* passes as the emblem of queer and hence post-identity politics in Britain shows that the problem of Islamophobia is not reducible to the critique of identity. The active participation of right- as well as left-wing, feminist as well as gay, official as well as civil powers in the Islamophobia industry proves racism more clearly than ever to be a *white* problem, which crosses other social and political differences.

Racism is, further, the vehicle that transports white gays and feminists into the political mainstream. The amnesia at the basis of the sudden assertion of a European ‘tradition’ of anti-homophobic and anti-sexist ‘core values’ is less a reflection of progressive gender relations than of regressive race relations. We will point to parallels in the German ‘integration’ debate around the recent Immigration Act (*Zuwanderungsgesetz*), the so-called honour killing of Hatun Sürücü and the new ‘Muslim Test’ in the nationality law. We critically examine the central role of individual migrant<sup>2</sup> women like Seyran Ateş and Necla Kelek in these German debates, who are constructed as the notable exception which confirms the rule of a victimised Oriental femininity. Irshad Manji, the lesbian journalist from Canada, is a further ‘exceptional Muslim’. Her popularity in Britain and Germany further underlines the transnational nature of these white processes of identification. In this article, we argue that neither figure – that of the notable exception and that of the faceless victim without agency – makes sense outside its imperialist context.<sup>3</sup>

The article began as a series of open letters by two of us about the growing

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<sup>2</sup> The concept ‘migrant’ has its origin in anti-racist activism in Germany and includes people of Turkish, North African, Southern European and other ethnicised origins, including German-born people of the second and subsequent generations of migration.

<sup>3</sup> Our choice of Britain and Germany stems in part from our biographies. Like many migrants

conservatism of the white gay leadership, circulated to queer and feminist forums in late 2005 and early 2006.<sup>4</sup> Our hope of finding allies and building anti-racist sexual coalitions was largely disappointed. Two years later, while making our last revisions, the issue of sexual and multicultural rights is at the brink of academic recognition. While we welcome any challenges to sexuality discourse in the 'war on terror', our epistemic communities need to keep asking difficult questions in the spirit of this volume. How do the new theories reinscribe or challenge the single-issue politics at the root of this problem, where sexual agency (and theory) remains white and cultural agency heterosexual? How do they contest or reinforce a construct of 'Eastern culture' as homophobic (and therefore open to official control and of re-colonisation by the 'liberated West')? Does their archive remain white, or do they acknowledge its theoretical and political predecessors in queer Muslims and other queers of colour? As we shall demonstrate, an effective intervention into the ways in which sexual rights and migrant rights have become constructed as mutually contradictory requires a critical historiography, which questions how white subjects came to claim the right to define and theorise sexual liberation projects in the first place.

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and people with biographical backgrounds and links to Germany, Jin and Esra migrated to Britain in the search of a better place (Jin is still living here now). Tamsila has visited Germany and has 'queer-extended' family links with people 'originating' there. The two contexts are interesting in that they are often presented as opposing paradigms of race relations, with differing histories of colonialism, genocide, and migration (Piper 1998). Britain has traditionally been viewed as the more liberal regime, with its (now defunct) *ius soli* (law of the soil) model of citizenship and its (now embattled) state multiculturalism. This contrasting view is contradicted by the findings presented in this article, which point to the growing convergence and intertextuality of violent Orientalisms throughout Europe and the self-identified 'West'.

<sup>4</sup> The second birth place of this article, Esra's and Jin's *Intersections* classrooms at Hamburg University and Humboldt University Berlin (January and February 2006), has been more fruitful. We would like thank our students, as well as Jennifer Petzen, the organisers and participants at the *Out of Place* conference, the *Re/visiönen* panel at the Left Book Days in Berlin, Liz Fekete, *Next Generation*, and the fellow activists from the *Queer&Ethnicity* Conference (Qekon) (Spring 2002), the *Queer&Ethnicity* space at *Queeruption* Berlin (Summer 2002), and the *Blackfist* sex radical queer of colour list (Summer 2007), for various moments of collaboration, inspiration and encouragement.

## The Conditions of Queer-of-Colour Representation in Britain

In the British gay and lesbian mainstream, people of colour were traditionally treated as the heterosexual competitors for public resources and recognition. In contrast to some feminists, most white gays did not identify as part of a subculture whose internal heterogeneity required justification. Rather, they located questions of power and justice firmly *outside* their community.

In this model people of colour long existed only as perpetrators of homophobia. For example, the free community news magazine *Pink Paper* very visibly featured Black homophobic individuals or groups such as Robert Mugabe or Nation of Islam (see covers of issues 698, 10 August 2001, and 734, 26 April 2002). This contrasted with the invisibility of Black gays, who simply did not exist in this frame.

Where people of colour were represented as (again heterosexual) victims of oppression, we were depicted as privileged. Statements such as ‘You could never say such a thing about a black person’ were common in the *Pink*. The invention of the protected black subject allows white gays and lesbians to fantasise themselves as innocent and marginalised – not only by the state but also and especially by black people themselves. This invites a repression of white gay violence towards queers of colour, and naturalises our dislocation from gay space. The narcissism of this definition of oppression became palpable in April 1999, during the nail bomb attacks by the fascist David Copeland. Many white gays and lesbians seemed almost triumphant when Copeland, after attacking the black area Brixton and the South-Asian Brick Lane, chose gay Soho as his third target.

Needless to say, queers of colour already looked back on a history of self-organisation at that time. Black and Asian sexual culture flourished during the 1980s under the left-wing Greater London Council (Mason-John and Khambatta 1993). However, this era left few traces on the *Pink*, which remained firmly in white hands. In the official gay history, queers of colour simply did not exist.

The year 2001 appeared to change this dramatically. Even before the attacks on New York, Islam had emerged as the new national and global enemy. Since gender and sexuality are the new yardsticks for democracy, white gays claimed a central role in this ‘war on terror’. In the ‘liberation’ of Muslim gays, they delivered the ideological justification for the ‘civilising’ mission.

Ironically, given the whiteness as well as masculinity of the magazine, it was the blown-up face of a woman in a burqa who adorned the *Pink* issue on the military invasion of Afghanistan ('Blood and Sand', 5 October, 2001). The young, tan face, its large brown eyes cast upwards at the camera, clearly followed Orientalist scripts (Yeğenoğlu 1998). A Muslim woman, presumably heterosexual and hence victimised, was the perfect symbol for the new-found prowess of white gay masculinity (Petzen 2005).

The new gay masculinity was also empowered by the lifting of the ban on homosexuality. Three issues after 'Blood and Sand', another young, attractive face was featured on the cover of the *Pink* ('Ready for War', 26 October 2001). This time it was a white man with dreamy blue eyes, framed by camouflage clothing and some leaves and twigs. The pin-up style gaze of the model, who was also depicted crawling through bushes in the inside of the magazine, was evocative of gay porn catering to military fetishes. The aesthetic appeal and near symmetry of these two images, of the 'Muslim' woman and the gay 'soldier', illustrates the distinct sexual timbre of the gay participation in the war (see Kuntsman 2008).<sup>5</sup> This participation was celebrated as a multiple human rights victory: the liberation of gays in Britain, which in turn enabled the liberation of faceless Muslim gays in the countries of occupation.

Independently of this, Muslim gays had already begun to organise themselves. Encouraged by its American predecessor, *Al Fatiha UK* was founded in 1998 and later (in 2002) re-named Imaan. In 2001, Tamsila Tauqir co-founded the *Safra Project* for Muslim lesbians, bisexual women and trans-people. These developments were overlooked at first by dominant organs who seemed less interested in 'oppressed gay Muslims' now that they were speaking for themselves. The editors of the *Pink* mostly ignored the numerous readers' letters submitted by gay Muslims and their allies, who were protesting the gay participation in the Islamophobic project.

Then, however, interview requests multiplied, not only from the gay but also the mainstream press. We argue that this does not constitute a real break with the traditional marginalisation of gay Muslims. Rather, political events,

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<sup>5</sup> The performance of military masculinity can in this post-ban context also be interpreted as a shift from a subversive to a loyal repetition (see Haritaworn 2008).

academic research projects and media productions about gay Muslims are controlled by white people who determine which Muslims participate, what kind of questions they get to answer, and how their contributions are edited. Ironically, Muslim gays are invited to speak only when they give their voices up to white people, who can then appear to generously give it back to them.

This was the case in January 2006, during the debate around the homophobic statements by Sir Iqbal Sacranie, the head of the Muslim Council of Britain. This debate corresponded, both temporally and rhetorically, with the German one around the 'Muslim Test' of nationality. In the course of the following months, Tamsila Tauqir received numerous requests, not only by the *Pink Gay.com* and *Gay Times*, but also by mainstream publications such as the *Times*. Throughout the journalists wanted me to respond to the 'difficulties' of being gay and Muslim, as well as to the homophobia of Muslim communities in Britain and abroad. I often suggested shifting the focus to the considerable work being done within liberal and progressive Islam. Journalists reacted with silence when I asked them to report on progressive Imams who have conducted Nikahs (Muslim marriage contracts) for same-sex couples, or on parents who had supported their gay children.

The same lack of interest in the real agency of gay Muslims characterised the treatment of an article in *Gay.com* by Adnan Ali, the founder of *Al Fatiha UK* (Mirza 2006). Ali's article was severely edited without his permission and converted into a question-answer piece. This way he appeared as an alien whose experiences required the interpretation of experts, rather than an author and activist who is capable of representing his own critical voice. In the next section, we put this politics of representation into its historical context.

### **The Role of the 'Gay Muslim Victim' in the Islamophobic Project**

In her examination of the *Lesbian and Gay Association Germany (LSVD)*, Jennifer Petzen (2005) argues that the 'integration of gay migrants' is now a central goal of mainstream gay politics in Germany. Petzen regards this as a new trend among white gays, who are staking out their territory in the lucrative integration game and entering mainstream politics. White homosexuals assert their equality with white heterosexuals by claiming their expert status in the civilising of the 'homophobic migrant'.

That this is not only a German phenomenon is illustrated by two pa-

pers by Jasbir Puar (2006)<sup>6</sup>, the non-Muslim queer of colour theorist, and Leslie Feinberg (2006), the white Jewish queer and trans activist. The two authors examine, not coincidentally maybe from a safe trans-Atlantic distance, the racial politics of the Australian-British activist Peter Tatchell and his group *Outrage*. *Outrage* was long considered a forerunner of queer politics (Smyth 1996), the direct-action alternative to *Stonewall*, the other major gay organisation in Britain, which has used lobbying as its prime political method. In alternative queer contexts, too, Tatchell has enjoyed some popularity. In Spring 2006, for example, the flyer of Club *Wotever*, the biggest alternative queer event in London, called on its queer and genderqueer visitors to support Tatchell's work through donations.

Tatchell plays an important role not only for the British public, where he is treated as one of the main gay representatives. He has also established himself internationally as an expert on gay issues in Muslim countries as well as those of Zimbabwe and Jamaica. Feinberg describes him as a key actor in the 'International Day of Action Against Homophobic Persecution in Iran' on 19 June 2006. Even though his call for sanctions against the 'Islamofascists in Iran' was based on an ambiguous translation from Farsi, Tatchell has been able to expand his 'internationalist' project, most recently through his new organisation *Peter Tatchell Human Rights Fund (PTHRF)*. In an article on his website, Tatchell describes the legitimisation of the PTHRF by quoting the praise of not only two liberal Muslims but also his own co-worker:

Peter's human rights campaigns have gone global. His successes mean he is deluged with requests for help from activists all over the world. To meet these demands, he is working 16 hours a day, seven

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, Puar's *Terrorist Assemblages*, which contains very similar critiques of gay and queer whiteness at this historical juncture, has only become available to us since the writing of this article. Puar elegantly conceptualises this with the concept of exceptionalism (the ideology of the West as the vanguard of sexual progress), and links this with the state of exception (the indefinite suspension of basic democratic principles such as the rule of law and the national sovereignty of Southern states), and with changes in Orientalism and western gender regimes. Besides critiquing the politics of Tatchell and *Outrage*, she also examines homonationalism sexual exceptionalism in other contexts, such as the de-criminalisation of sodomy, and Sikh organising in the US.

days a week. Such as huge workload is damaging his health and is unsustainable. We need to raise enough money to get Peter a fully equipped office and full-time staff support. (<http://www.peter-tatchell.net/religion/pthrf2006.htm>, accessed 1 September 2006)

Linguistically, this quote is interesting in that it represents Southern queers as inundating Tatchell with their demands for help, which Tatchell meets by sacrificing himself to the point of risking his own health. In using terms such as ‘deluge’ and ‘sustainable’, the passage evokes racialised languages of environmental and social disaster in a South whose problems will explode if left to themselves. The quote brings to mind the colonial trope of the white man’s burden, who foregoes his own needs for the sake of saving the poor victims who cannot help themselves.<sup>7</sup>

In the current context of Islamophobia, white people are once again able to identify themselves as the global champions of ‘civilisation’, ‘modernity’ and ‘development’. Gay Muslims are the latest symbol of this identity. They are the ideological token victim who must be liberated from its ‘barbaric, backward’ society, by means that include political and military violence. In this, Muslim gays are joining Muslim women, whose ‘liberation’, as postcolonial feminists have long argued, has traditionally provided the justification for imperialism.

What is so concerning about these images is not only that they represent gay Muslims as victims without agency who cannot represent themselves, but also that these images feed directly into a virulent anti-Muslim racism. This occurs in the context of the New World Order. Islam and ‘the Muslims’ have supplanted the Eastern Block and ‘the communists’ as the new global enemies. In contrast to the old enemy, who was merely of a different political persuasion, the difference that Islam represents goes much deeper, back to its uncivilised, pre-modern ‘culture’.

The construct of ‘Muslim homophobia’ is central to the debates around security and ‘core values’ in the new Europe. It legitimates repressive anti-terror measures, attacks on nationality, immigration and educational

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<sup>7</sup> We thank Sara Ahmed for suggesting this interpretation in her comments on the earlier draft of this paper.



rights and the shocking dismantling of civil liberties which we are currently witnessing. Besides terrorism, gender and sexuality are the grounds upon which the Islamophobic wars at home and abroad are fought.

In Germany, this became apparent in January 2006, in the debate around the discriminatory 'Muslim Test' of nationality. This test applies exclusively to applicants whose prior nationality was with a country considered 'Muslim'. Half of the thirty questions in the test are around terrorism, the other half around gender and sexuality. For example, applicants are asked what they think of beating one's wife or locking up one's daughter, and what they would do if their son came out to them as gay.

This reflects a transformation of 'European' identities, which besides 'democracy' now claim 'women's equality' and 'gay rights' as symbols of their superior 'modernity' and 'civilisation'. This elevates gender and sexuality to mainstream political status. While we welcome this development, we find it vital to note that its main basis is not a progress in gender and sexual politics but a regression in racial politics.

The postcolonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty observed how 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'. For example, the mainstream embrace of gay rights as a 'core value' during the debate around Sir Iqbal's statements occurred only five years after the gay age of consent was equalised in 2001, and a mere three years after the repeal of the infamous Section 28, which prevented many teachers from discussing homosexuality with their pupils.<sup>8</sup> The British resistance against gay equality is also reflected in the fact that the Labour government had to use the Parliament Act in order to repeal Section 28, as the House of Lords, that pillar of British tradition, had repeatedly vetoed its abolition. And during the height of the debate around Sir Iqbal in winter 2005/2006, the homophobic murder of a gay man in London barely made it into the news.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, schools 'shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.

The coinciding debate about the ‘Muslim Test’ in Germany was characterised by similar contradictions and amnesias. Opinion makers such as journalist Feddersen of the daily *tageszeitung* (whose memory as a gay man should be better) defended the Test by pointing to a German ‘tradition’ of gay friendliness which needed to be defended from the Muslim migrants. This ignored how recently German gays and lesbians achieved rights such as the registration of same-sex partnerships – namely, in 2001.

The construct of ‘Muslim homophobia’ confers value to ‘Western’ identities. It also confers political capital to some ‘Westerners’ who have traditionally been excluded from it. Its biggest beneficiaries are white women and gay men. This contrasts with women of colour and queers of colour, whose situation has stagnated or even worsened. In the name of protecting Muslim women, white feminists such as Alice Schwarzer in Germany join ranks with the ones who ridiculed them as hysteric man haters, and who they once identified as the centre of patriarchy. ‘The patriarchy’ is now elsewhere, and both parties have made peace by locating and fixing it there. By representing Muslim women, white feminists have for the first time gained entry to the old boys’ club of mainstream politics.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, white gays have been given the main role in the representation of Muslim gays. We have already seen how Peter Tatchell has claimed resources and recognition for his ‘international human rights’ campaign. In contrast to figures such as Schwarzer and Feddersen, he has been successful in addressing both the mainstream and alternative queer and left-wing scenes.

Tatchell’s success in alternative scenes relies partly on his rhetorical citation of the languages of solidarity, internationalism and anti-fascism. In contrast, he often describes Muslims as Nazis. Besides the Iranian government (cf. above) Tatchell described Sir Iqbal and the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) as fascistic, in an article on his website which critiques Sir Iqbal’s participation in the Trade Union Congress Tatchell. The article has six comparisons between the MCB and the neo-Nazi British National

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<sup>9</sup> In May 2008, Alice Schwarzer was awarded the prestigious literary Ludwig-Börne Prize for her activism against ‘forced marriage and honour killings’. In her speech she compares the anti-Semitism experienced by Börne, a nineteenth-century Jewish German writer, to the situation of women and argues that Jews and women are the first targets of the Islamists (Gabriel 2008). This contains similarities to Tatchell’s rhetoric, discussed below.

Party (BNP). To quote one example:

Resorting to inflammatory language barely distinguishable from the homophobic tirades of the neo-Nazi BNP, the MCB website demonises same-sex relationships as ‘offensive’, ‘immoral’ and ‘repugnant’. <http://www.petertatchell.net/politics/sacranie.htm> [accessed 1 September 2006].

The comparison with the BNP not only works to discredit the MCB, it also rhetorically equates the subjects and objects of racism by constructing white gays as the most oppressed group, which the Left neglect in favour of their ethnic competitors. This also emerges in the following quote from the same article:

UAF [Unite Against Fascism] would not invite as a speaker someone who said that black people are immoral, harmful and spread diseases, or who vilified Jewish people as offensive, immoral and repugnant. Why, then, are they giving a platform to a bigot who says these things about gays and lesbians? <http://www.petertatchell.net/politics/sacranie.htm> [accessed 1 September 2006].

The comparison between ‘black’ and ‘Jewish people’ on the one hand and ‘gays and lesbians’ on the other hand serves to construct them as non-overlapping groups who are in competition with each other. Gay and liberal Muslims are only mentioned briefly and as generalised groups. Even the person of Sir Iqbal, who is ostentatiously the article’s subject, seems so incidental that his surname is misspelled three times. The main effect of the article is to create a basic equivalence between ‘Muslim=Nazi’ and ‘Muslim=Evil’, in which specific persons, relationships and events appear ultimately interchangeable. This is in direct contrast to Tatchell’s own willingness to collaborate with the extreme right. On 25 March 2006, Tatchell participated with several racist and fascist groups in the *March for free Expression*. A further participant was the *Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA)*, who became infamous for their Islamophobic comments on the attacks of 6 July 2005 on the London public transport system.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The September 2005 of the *Gay Humanist Quarterly* carried the title ‘The Sick Face of Islam’.

In their responses to their anti-racist critics, Tatchell and *GALHA* both invoke their freedom of speech. However, Tatchell's high status in the queer scene, the wider left and the mainstream press render criticism of him dangerous. We have already mentioned the two most important critiques by Puar and Feinberg from the US. Unfortunately, white allies in Europe who are prepared to make similar critiques in their own name are rare. This may partly be why queer Muslim activists in Britain have so far been alone in bearing Tatchell's caustic defence.<sup>11</sup> He has especially targeted individuals who refused to assume their role as exceptional tokens. In this, he has employed tactics of intimidation and aggressive divide and rule among queer Muslims, progressive Muslims and the Inter Faith Community. In a typical reversal of actual power relations, Tatchell has attempted to discredit those who resist his patronage, by interpreting their resistance as an attack, and himself as their victim.

Tatchell's abuse of a rhetoric of alliance becomes clear when we consider the negative consequences of his politics on queer people in Muslim communities. Rather than help, politics such as Tatchell's have worsened the

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<sup>11</sup> An empirical account of the situation of queer Muslims, both in 'Western' and in 'Muslim' countries, is beyond the scope of this article. It is important to note that the situation of sexual and gender minorities in Iraq has worsened considerably as a result of the occupation. Ali Hili from *Iraqi LGBT*, in his talk at *Trans London* on 21 August, 2007, highlighted that despite all the repression of the Saddam Hussein regime, its record on LGBT rights was good. The existence of a flourishing subculture and of anti-discrimination procedures in the 1990s contrasts with the rampant persecution and frequent of gay and trans people in the current militarised culture of the occupation (perpetrators of this include American soldiers). It is also noteworthy that since writing this article, African LGBTI human rights defenders have written a press release asking Peter Tatchell to 'Stay out of African LGBTI issues. You have proven that you have no respect for conveying the truth with regards to Africa or consulting African LGBTI leaders before carrying out campaigns that have severe consequences in our countries. You have betrayed our trust over and over again. This is neo-colonialism and it has no place in our struggle or in Africa.' (31 January, 2007, n.p.) The background to the press release was Tatchell's inflammatory campaign against the Nigerian government, regarding a same-sex marriage prohibition which regional activists had in fact already defeated. The authors accused *Outrage* of exaggerating the violations of their governments for their own publicity and gain, and of putting African activists in danger by selectively appropriating their words for their own agenda. It is interesting to compare this account with Tatchell's self-identification as sacrificing himself to the overwhelming demands from Southern activists.

situation for the majority of queer Muslims. It has become increasingly difficult for groups such as the *Safra Project*, who are forced into the frontline of the artificially constructed gay v. Muslim divide, to contest sexual oppression in Muslim communities. The more homophobia is constructed as belonging to Islam, the more anti-homophobic talk will be viewed as a white, even racist, phenomenon, and the harder it will be to increase tolerance and understanding among straight Muslims. The dialogue which *Safra* and other queer Muslim groups have long sought over this with white gay activists such as Tatchell have proved indifferent to the fact that the mud which they sling onto Muslim communities disproportionately lands on queer Muslims.

### **Liberated Muslims? Or: 'The Exception Confirms the Rule.'**

While the majority of Muslim women and queers are becoming more and more marginalised, a handful have managed to draw personal gain from the new politics of (mis)representation. In colonial tokenising fashion individuals are invited to support the hegemonic agenda with hyper-assimilationist arguments. At first sight this appears like a welcome recognition of multiply minoritised agency. This recognition is, however, part and parcel of a politics of 'exceptionalism' (see Puar 2006). Individual Muslim women and Muslim gays are described as having emancipated or liberated themselves from their repressive culture, by embracing the gender-progressive culture of the 'liberal West'. Not only do they thereby confirm the exceptionality of the West, they also emerge as exceptions to the rule that most women and gays 'from this culture' are in fact repressed. This confirms rather than contests the view that 'Islam' is the most sexist and homophobic culture of all. It also constructs 'Europe' or the 'West' as a safe haven for Muslim women and gays, which includes them, protects them from the violence of their communities, and gives them opportunities to make their voices heard. This is within a neo-liberal ideology which constructs the countries of immigration as free from discrimination and equal in opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This last insight was inspired by an essay written by two of Jin's students (Hopman and Taymoorzadeh 2007). The following discussion focuses on the German case. However, the exceptionalist discourse is a more general phenomenon. For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the Netherlands fulfils a similar role as Necla Kelek and Seyran Ateş (Ghorashi 2003).

In Germany this became apparent during the ‘integration’ debate around the immigration act (*Zuwanderungsgesetz*) which entered into force in January 2005. The main tenor of the immigration act has been the combination of ‘integrationist’ demands towards migrants with an acknowledgement that Germany is a country of immigration (Karakayalı and Tsianos 2005). The ‘honour killing’ of Hatun Sürücü, a woman of Kurdish descent, in February 2005, provided the perfect opportunity to put this philosophy of the immigration act into practice. The murder sparked off a highly charged debate on the sexual oppression of women, girls and gays in Muslim families, which was presented as evidence that migrants were not fulfilling their part of the ‘immigration contract’.

The persistent media presence of two women of Turkish descent, a lawyer and a sociologist respectively, lent further credence to these positions. In numerous interviews and essays Necla Kelek and Seyran Ateş deplored the prevalence of violence against women in the migrant community and advocated for a more restrictive migration regime in order to protect women’s rights (Erdem 2006, Erdem 2007). For example, Ateş has suggested that perpetrators of domestic violence should expect negative consequences for their immigration status (Ateş 2005, p. 4). Kelek was actually the consultant who helped the regional government in Baden-Württemberg devise the ‘Muslim Test’, the naturalisation questionnaire focusing on gender violence (*tageszeitung* 4 January, 2006, 3). Ateş and Kelek both support the questionnaire, arguing that it underlines gender equality as a fundamental value pertaining to German citizens (Am Orde and Bax 2006, Kelek 2006). Therefore, people of migrant descent should not be granted German citizenship unless they demonstrate their adherence to such ‘German’ values (Kelek 2006).

However, the relation between gender violence and politics is never as clear-cut as Ateş and Kelek would like us to believe. Rather, struggles are defined by the political linkages we choose to construct between ‘race’, class, gender (Mohanty 1991). Eberhard Seidel (2006), for example, the left-wing German journalist, has drawn our attention to the Orientalist representation inherent in the naturalisation questionnaire. He argues that the interview does not so much reflect social realities in Germany, but rather ‘how Germans would like to see themselves: their thinking free of sexism, antisemitism and racism; blind vis-à-vis gender, sexual orientation

and ethnicity; acting according to the categorical imperative of Kant.' (Seidel 2006, p 11) Similarly, Miltiadis Oulios has pointed to the deficit of democratic rights in Germany:

The current debate deflects from the fact that civil rights – and the attainment thereof through naturalisation – are collective rights. They do not constitute a privilege through which the specially conformists should be rewarded. (Oulios 2006, p. 12)

In the discourse on Muslim homophobia, Irshad Manji, the Muslim lesbian journalist from Canada, is claiming a similar 'exceptional' role. Manji's argument is slightly more complex than those made by Ateş and Kelek. On the one hand, she proposes the idea that Muslim culture is particularity homophobic, sexist and anti-Semitic. On the other hand, she promotes a progressive approach to Islam, or *Ijtihad*. *Ijtihad* uses contemporary arguments in order to apply Quranic principles in the life of a person, and is embraced by a growing global movement of progressive Islam. Nevertheless, Irshad Manji presents herself as the only proponent of *Ijtihad*. She claims her own agency by denying the long history and presence of a global movement for *Ijtihad* in the 21st century. She thus confirms the exceptionalist narrative, claiming cultural and sexual agency by directly reinscribing the general rule that Islam is ultimately reactionary.

As an educated person from the second generation of migration, Irshad Manji enjoys extraordinary access to the media, financial support from international organisations, and recognition as the 'voice of gay Muslims'. Her popularity in Germany and Britain prove not only her charisma but also the ease with which Orientalisms travel between the metropolises. In contrast to Manji's success as an exceptional, liberated gay Muslim, other progressive Muslim grassroots organisations, teachers, academics and activists and their allies have had great difficulty in gaining support and publicity. This is especially the case for those activists who refuse to repeat cultural stereotypes, and who posit the many positive impulses in Islam as an indicative of a compassionate and just faith that is open to all. We realise that our public invisibility stems from the fact that our representation of Islam, sexuality and gender is multi-dimensional and therefore less palatable for white middle-class non-Muslims.

Queer Muslim voices are instrumentalised for a 'homophobia' debate

which largely takes place among whites. While some migrant and Muslim individuals have gained from the exceptionalist discourse, white gays have profited disproportionately from their aggressive (mis)representation of Muslim gays. The next paragraph examines the political consequences of this development.

### **Beyond Populism and Anti-Essentialism: Coalition Politics in the New World Order**

Taking the historic struggle to end oppression based on sexuality, gender and sex out of the world context of today's battle by formerly colonised countries against imperialism will not advance the goal of sexual and gender liberation (...) nor will it build genuine international ties of solidarity. In fact, it misdirects the struggle into alignment with the worldwide goal of imperialism (Feinberg 2006, n.p.).

The current politics of queer of colour (mis)representation points to the limits of the popular discourse on human rights. Freedom of speech, democracy, women's liberation and gay rights are all invoked to legitimate Islamophobia and attack the rights of all racialised people. As the killing of non-Muslim Jean Charles de Menezes by the London Metropolitan police in July 2005 showed, these attacks have direct consequences on the lives of all people of colour, especially those among us whose phenotype is read as 'Muslim'.

We welcome the growth of a large-scale civil liberties movement which fights developments such as the anti-terrorism legislation, extraordinary renditions and identity cards. However, it is becoming more and more clear how the language of rights and freedoms is itself highly racialised. Civil liberties are celebrated as the achievements of a West which must be defended from its alien invaders. The London *March for free Expression* saw gay, queer and fascist groups collaborate in order to create a civil liberties movements whose main others were Muslims. This showed how deeply implicated gays and queers are in this racialising project.

Progressive intellectuals have been slow in making sense of these contradictions. While Black and migrant rights saw worse attacks than ever, we remained stuck in the dead end of the identity critique. While racialised



people and communities were surveilled, detained, deported and killed on the grounds of their 'culture' and their phenotype, we increasingly demonised attempts to problematise this as 'essentialist'. We have ignored for too long how certain bodies are read, as morally inferior, out of place and expandable; how these readings, far from being mere intellectual exercises, translate into exclusions and oppressions; which dominant identities and ideologies they reinforce and repeat; and how we can fight the power relations at their basis.

This should not distract from the fact that the anti-essentialist critique was historically very important. In the early 1990s, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992) showed how populist politics about 'blacks and women (and, we might add, gays and transpeople)' produced these as oppositional groups in the first place. Even though the policies were designed in order to address racism, in effect they strengthened the racist belief in an authentic black subject with an unchanging cultural essence of which sexism and homophobia are integral parts. They silenced multiply minoritised people by rendering positions such as queer of colour an impossibility. In this way, they produced the representational power of white queers such as Peter Tatchell over Muslim and other queer people of colour.

The anti-essentialist critique continues to be important in order to underline the heterogeneity of Islamic discourse, and the harmful effects of official attempts to homogenise it. This became apparent at the *Political Islam* conference in London on 29 June 2006. Several of the speakers challenged the Home Office support of 'moderate Muslim' groups. The policy is clearly meant to prove that the Home Office does not consider all Muslims to be undemocratic. However, the supported groups are far from moderate, and progressive Muslim groups continue to lack support. These political practices are based in the same essentialism that Anthias and Yuval-Davis critiqued, which treats 'Muslim culture' as basically incompatible with feminist, anti-racist and other progressive ideals. The news is the support that is now given to individual Muslim feminists, gays and lesbians. However, we have shown how these individuals figure as the exception which confirms the rule that Muslims are essentially different, inferior and in need of assimilation and control.

Nevertheless it is important to place the anti-essentialist critique in its current context. Just like the language of rights and freedoms, anti-essentialism

can be used to progressive and retrogressive ends. For example, the critique is levelled much more frequently at anti-racist organisations than mainstream feminist or gay ones. Within the latter, it is most often women and queers of colour who are discredited as 'essentialist', and rarely the white centres of these movements themselves. In feminist and other emancipatory theoretical circles, there is an acceptance of a 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988) which gives oppressed people the right to organise themselves outside of the patronage of members of the oppressor group in order to define a resistant agenda. However, this 'strategic essentialism' is still more acceptable for white women and gays than for people of colour, especially where we are female, queer or trans (see hooks 1990, Moya 1997 and Lavie and Swedenburg 1996 for critiques).

Too often, the identity critique spares those with the most powerful (and reactionary) positions. There is a double standard that says that in 'women's questions', 'women' can speak for themselves, and in 'gay questions', 'gays'. In queer Muslim questions, however, a white man should represent us, even though there are two organisations in England alone, which are much better equipped for this task.

Anti-essentialism is neither power neutral nor progressive per se. As a theory it is agnostic towards its political context. The current context is determined by the imperialist 'war on terror'. As Jennifer Petzen (2005) has shown, the inclusion of white gays coincides with and is premised on the exclusion of those racialised as Muslim. White gays and lesbians receive moral and legal citizenship and in return deliver the ideological legitimation for imperialism. We, too, believe that it is no coincidence that more and more white gays and lesbians show a willingness to repress the brutal history of European homophobia and its continuing legacy of violence, pathologisation and criminalisation. The construction of Muslims as the true homophobes equips white gay people with material as well as symbolic resources, and empowers their previously victimised identity.

The relationship between gay assimilationism and gay imperialism becomes clear when we think back to the early sexual liberation movement. The central role of white gays and lesbians in the new anti-Muslim world order contrasts with their marginal place in the old anti-communist world order. Many leaders of the early movement identified as communists and fought for a radical transformation of society. The invention of Islam as the

new enemy and the historic centrality of gender and sexual discourses in racist ideologies converge with the unreflected whiteness of the gay movement in order to create the racialised conditions of its assimilation.

At the same time, we have to be clear that the anti-assimilationist streams of current sexual politics are not outside the imperialist project. On the contrary, they frequently participate in it. White people with queer identities often tell us that they do not feel like confronting the gay leadership with its racism, as they have already distanced themselves from its gender and sexual ideologies. We have demonstrated, however, how strongly the Islamophobic positions of the gay *LSVD* overlap with those of the queer *Outrage*, and what broad support Tatchell enjoys in the queer scene. This overlap throws into question the anti-essentialist celebration of Queer as an anti- or post identity which transgresses the identity problems of the old Gay. It further underlines how important it is that all feminists, gays, lesbians, queers, transpeople and other actors of gender and sexual politics take a clear position on the role offered to them in the imperialist project.

The need for coalitions is more urgent than ever. These coalitions must be based on a respect for oppressed people's right to self organisation, as well as a will to honestly position ourselves in relation to both our marginalised and our dominant identities. It is crucial that we recognise the differential access which partners of each coalition enjoy to its symbolic and material resources, and that we actively and radically redistribute them.

Being an ally means work needs to be shown in action as well as in words. It is not enough to call yourself anti-racist, pro-Muslim or left-wing if you are not willing to get uncomfortable with yourself and others. Being an ally is less about feeling cosy in your progressive identity than about putting in the footwork, and putting yourself on the line with other privileged people. To paraphrase the powerful dedication in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), it requires that you walk and fight with us – not on behalf of us.

For example, we are sceptical of white queer intellectuals who churn out article upon article about gay Muslims without ever challenging their white colleagues, or who plagiarise and then ignore the work of their queer of colour colleagues. We find it hard to accept as allies the white feminist academics who interpret our experiences for us and then recycle our words as pre-theoretical raw material for their lectures or theses. We are wary of the so-called ally whose burning interest in Islamophobia is not accompanied

by a commitment against other forms of racism. While the new interest in sexual multiplicity is welcome, white gender and sexual activists and intellectuals must ask themselves how far they are reducing Islamophobia, in a Tatchell-like manner, to a fad which they can cash in on.

Migrant people and people of colour, too, need to rethink our allied politics. Migrant and queer people of colour who are not Muslim must decline offers to put ourselves at the service of the Islamophobic project by selling our expertise in multiple minority questions. Migrant men and heterosexuals of colour face an understandable pressure to concur with the public condemnation of migrant sexism and Muslim homophobia. However, being an ally to women and gays requires at least as much solidarity with racialised women and gays. As this and other articles suggest, many racialised feminists and queers resist this victim role and crave progressive allies who provide active support in minority communities rather than gaining the respect of white people.

The new world order, which scapegoats Muslims as the biggest threat to global and national democracy, and constructs them as deserving of ever increasing levels of violence, confronts us with new pitfalls for divide and rule. The unprecedented attacks on civil rights and civil liberties, the shrinking of political repertoires, and the growing embrace by the minoritised of assimilationism, equal opportunity and other neoliberal discourses, force us to move on from old approaches such as populism and anti-essentialism. We have argued that this is achievable by paying more not less attention to multiple differences; not by dismantling our hard-won rights and resources, but by radically proliferating and redistributing them.

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