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Unpacking Inclusion and Building Queer(er) Alliances

An interview with OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon

Since its first articulation in 2007, Jasbir Puar's concept of "homonationalism" has been widely used by queer theorists and activists to understand, resist, and build alternatives to the cooptation of queer existence by neoliberalism. Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging, a recently published anthology, brings together a group of radical queer scholars to examine the ways in which homonationalism plays out in the Canadian context. Robyn Letson and Jasmine sat down with its editors, OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon, to discuss the book as well as their own relationships to queerness, social movements, and what it looks like to resist and build alternatives to liberal notions of inclusion.

OmiSoore Dryden is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Thorneloe University, part of Laurentian University. OmiSoore's research examines the discourses and deployment of blood narratives, as they intersect with Black diasporas, racialized sexuality and the continued signification of HIV/AIDS. She is currently working on her manuscript, tentatively titled, "The Complexity of Blood: Canadian Blood Donation and the Queerness of Blackness." You can follow her on Twitter @OmiSooreDryden.

Suzanne Lenon is an Associate Professor in the Department of Women's & Gender Studies at the University of Lethbridge. Her teaching and research interests lie at the intersections of critical race feminisms and law, gender, and sexuality. Her work has appeared in Social Identities; Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture; Journal of Intercultural Studies; Canadian Journal of Women and the Law; darkmatter; and Atlantis: Critical Studies in Gender, Culture, and Social Justice. You can follow her on Twitter @kootenaydreams.

In which discourses and socio-political processes does this text intend to intervene? How do you imagine it extending beyond academic contexts?

OmiSoore: It is an intervention that disrupts the normative ways of thinking about gay and lesbian-ness (or the "homosexual," if you want to think of it that way), thus it is also an intervention into belonging and citizenship – both sexual and national – and the ways in which these are animated. Who is obscured and how are we implicated as a result of these normative animations? Our book explores the non-normative queer spaces obscured by some of these normative desires.

Suzanne: To add to that; the book is an effort to critically think about the parameters of legal and cultural queer inclusion in Canada and its profound relationship with processes of exclusion and un-belonging. M. Jacqui Alexander writes that citizenship is too fraught and too subject to state manipulation for it to act as a primary basis from which radical political mobilization can be carried out. The chapters within our book speak to this in many ways; we seek to rethink terms of belonging – what it means and what it could look like. Another book was published around the same time that we were writing ours called Queerly Canadian, and for OmiSoore and I that text really encapsulates what our book is trying to intervene in: there's this notion of "queerly Canadian" that understands sexual minorities, namely the "homosexual," as having once been on the outside of the nation and the national imaginary, only now to be included within terms of national belonging. This idea of "queerly Canadian" is a discourse that's really invested in Canada as a safe haven. Our book speaks back to this by situating "gay rights" as a field of power itself, by questioning the terms of national belonging, and by disturbing inclusion in a liberal-equality-rights paradigm.
OmiSoore: And in doing so we're re-framing the conversation about the kind of political work that is often overlooked by mainstream LGBT activism. Our book launch was a lovely demonstration of these tensions, with people in attendance who both participate in normative LGBT politics of inclusion and non-normative queer and trans folks who do really amazing transgressive work. This also includes those of us sitting on the panel – we and our contributors. We remain committed to challenging and disrupting our own normative desires toward something more transgressive. We live in and are part of communities in which our work isn’t only about what we’re thinking but also about how we put this into practice, on the ground, in our everyday lives.

Suzanne: And how we want to be with each other, ways of being that are sustainable and supportive. We did a book launch in Lethbridge where OmiSoore Skyped in and one of the book's contributors was there as well. The launch brought together a surprisingly wide range of people: students, academics, and community members. I would say that probably most people in the room hadn't heard of "homonalionalism" before nor perhaps had thought critically about the power relations that underpin the success of gay rights. In fact, given that Lethbridge is such a big part of the social conservative fabric that is southern Alberta, these kinds of critiques can be difficult to make because the forces of exclusion, discrimination, and violence are so strong. There is a real investment on the part of the city as well as community activists to build an inclusive and welcoming city to counter this, and I often feel like a feminist killjoy in the face of such language and desires. So the book launch was a really interesting, delightful, and inspiring evening of queer intervention. We hope that the book and its ideas spread to people and places that we can't even imagine it reaching.

How do we move past identity based organizing and build solidarity along different lines? Why is this an important direction for queer struggles to move in? Thinking through your own histories of queer organizing and theorizing in the Canadian context, what are some of the barriers and divisions to this shift?

Suzanne: One of the things that OmiSoore and I were talking about before this interview is that your question is in fact an old

one – one that social justice movements have engaged with for a long time. I'm thinking about the work of the Combahee River Collective and their "A Black Feminist Statement" published in the 1970s, a piece of writing that brilliantly theorizes and prioritizes a framework of interlocking oppressions as a means of connecting liberation movements with one another. I'm thinking also of the writing of Bernice Reagan on coalition, or the work of Audre Lorde and Angela Davis. I think building communities, solidarities, and connections along lines other than identity is critical because queers are everywhere.

We don't all live our lives within a singular identity of, for example, being "just gay." To use the well-known words of Audre Lorde, there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we don't live single-issue lives. But I do think a barrier to building coalition and solidarity along lines other than identity is in fact the giving up of identity – at least for white queers. And by this I mean giving up being at the centre. It means attending to practices of citationality in our academic work: who am I listening to? Which intellectual and activist inheritances am I turning to?

Coalition beyond identity means doing the work of figuring out and understanding the structural and institutional ways our lives are constituted. This is key for moving beyond a politics of recognition and inclusion, which are based on identity, towards transforming the logics of social in/equalities and in/securities, and, paraphrasing Sara Ahmed, learning how not to reproduce what we have inherited.

OmiSoore: I was also thinking about the kind of conversations that were happening in what some would call third wave feminism, where women of colour thought through questions such as, "How do we imagine a political movement that understands the interlocking spaces in which we exist?" And there was this sense of incomprehension. Second wave feminists – white feminists – couldn't imagine that work on sexism, racism, and homophobia needed to happen within the work of feminism. And as such, women of colour became incoherent to this type of neoliberal feminist identity. Some of the responses to this narrowing of feminist activism include Alice Walker's work on "womanism." For me, I believe that the transgressive queer work discussed in our book offers something much more fluid, therefore dislodging static and delimited identities.
I think back to the theoretical work of the 1990s and the work of feminist scholars like Martha Minow, who speaks on legal studies and the “commatization” of identities, for example, woman comma queer comma black comma – that kind of thing. For us, when we were thinking about this book project, we wondered: how do we get to know our creative selves not so much in a narcissistic way, but in a way in which we can do work that mirrors and speaks to the incoherent and transgressive – the something-more-fluid. We wondered, how can we imagine more fluid identities and more fluid spaces?

Suzanne: Also, how do we even understand identity? Is it fixed, or contingent and shifting? One of the ways I talk to my students about identity is through the double sense of root and route (and I am indebted to Dr. Alissa Trotz for introducing me to this conceptualization via Stuart Hall). We have our “root,” which is produced from interlocking relationships of power. But we also have a “route,” a relationship to our present and our past. I’m thinking of the work of Adrienne Rich and the “politics of location” and how that can be problematized: our location is something to take responsibility for. In some ways, it’s helpful for me to think that different lines of identity are issue-based. We are bound together through these interlocking relations of power. I think Marty Fink’s chapter in Disrupting Queer Inclusion on the Prison Correspondence Project is a good example of how to answer this question about who belongs and who’s excluded from queer communities, because the project challenges a solidarity politics being based on a “just gay” identity.

OmiSoore: I often ask my students how they know what they know about themselves. I do this as a way to disrupt the closed nature of identities and also to reveal how “the Other” is conceptualized as something outside of themselves – and their communities – external to their being. I often use the concept of woman as an example. Many of my students have not had to explore how they come to occupy this gender position, conflating it with their sex designation. So I ask them, how do you know you are a woman? And I ask them to come up with an answer that does not rely on bodily “clues” (i.e., genitalia). I do this because I hope it will prompt them to think differently not only about gender positions, but also sex designations – to think differently about “the Other”: in this case often framed as the trans and/or genderqueer person.

I do a similar exercise asking how they know they are Canadian citizens, as many assume that racialized others are immigrants. I’ll probe: why do you ask the person of colour where they are “really” from? Why have you decided that this person isn’t “Canadian-Canadian.” I often pair this exercise with asking them in groups to summarize how Canada came to be Canada. I find that these types of exercises offer a way to pry open the limited conditions of gender identities, national identities, and group identities. All of this to say, I believe our book does something similar in terms of asking what community or communities we are really speaking about – and whose Canada?

A group of LGBTQ parents and their lawyers are currently engaged in a legal struggle to compel the Ontario government to pass Bill 137, also known as Cy and Ruby’s Act. The bill aims to equalize birth registration processes for LGBTQ families and for many would constitute a significant victory in the struggle for LGBTQ rights in Ontario. What are your thoughts on this type of inclusion into legal understandings of parenthood and family?

Suzanne: This kind of legal activism is grounded in a belief of law’s intentionality and orientation towards justice, fairness, and a commitment to equality. It also reinforces a particular understanding of family that is now being broadened to include, as this case was argued, lesbians. There’s a logic of inclusion that relies on and thus affirms the legitimacy and fairness of the status quo: “We’re just like you; we don’t deserve this unfair treatment just because we’re lesbian.” To make that argument in same-sex legal struggles, advocates cling to these imagined norms of citizenship and the social body, like class status and whiteness. I think the work of Dean Spade is particularly instructive here, challenging us to question the law’s own effectiveness and the ways in which seemingly progressive legal change can maintain certain structures and categories.

One of the things I struggle with in my critique of same-sex marriage is people’s real needs for recognition and for the material benefits that can come with being recognized in law, which I would certainly not want to disregard. The tension lies with what are we being included into? I think in many ways your question links back to the previous one on identity. Very often the mainstream lesbian and gay solution is to pass laws that seek recognition from
the state and the potential benefits that come from this kind of inclusion. What we don't have, alongside Bill 137, is an explicit effort to join with other people who are targeted by family law and the child welfare system. Who can and can't form a family? I mean, if we're thinking about being in solidarity along the lines of family, then perhaps there's something for the lesbian and gay liberal rights movement to also think about: whose children are being apprehended by the state? Who is even allowed to form a family?

OmiSoore: And the ways in which different conversations are excluded out of that. If we want to assume that children need a guardian, legally, then how do we determine what makes a guardian? Have we explored that? Does this Act allow for more than two legal guardians? What about a child with three or five parents? What about something that would acknowledge, accept, and respect different family configurations? In Toronto, African-Canadian political, legal, and social organizations want to start an African-Canadian Children’s Aid Society. If this was actually an integrated political movement, then connections would be drawn with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the continued outcome of the Sixties Scoop, the former Nova Scotia Home for Coloured Children (now called the Akoma Family Centre), and how these realities are connected with the over-representation of Black children in Children’s Aid. These are interconnected conversations that need to happen in more (seemingly disparate) spaces and places.

Suzanne: One of the things I first thought of when I read that question was Judith Butler’s piece, “Is Kinship Always-Already Heterosexual?” She ends it by suggesting that if we engage the terms of a pro/con binary then we ratify this very frame at the moment in which we choose a side. And so it renders other ways of imagining, in this case family, as unthinkable. What is the lost horizon? Because both sides, pro and con, circumscribe reality in particular ways. I also thought of Lauren Berlant’s work on “cruel optimism,” which situates homonormative gay rights struggles as a deeply affective attachment to inclusion. The ways that optimism, hope, and desire inform some of the online writing about Bill 137 speak to an affective structure of optimistic attachment that we keep returning to – this scene of the fantasy of inclusion – expecting that this time it will include us. The nearer we get to it, the more

it will help us in the world to be fully who we are. Inclusion always disappoints, but we keep holding onto it.

OmiSoore: This is where I think of Sara Ahmed’s On Being Included and her analysis of systemic commitments to diversity as opposed to unsettling and disrupting racism, homophobia, classism, and misogyny. Buying into diversity becomes: “Oh look!” – that’s the hope – “We did this, and now everyone is equal.” Yet, as Malinda Smith has researched, diversity only impacts white people: women, gays, people with disabilities. Diversity rarely changes the outcome for people of colour and Indigenous folks: women, queers, two-spirit people, people of colour/Indigenous people with disabilities. Claims of a commitment to diversity are in effect a balm, meant to divert attention away from its ineffectiveness. Diversity, adding colour to an already fixed and unchanged system, makes us feel better and distracts us from exploring what it means to live in a space of disruption and “killjoyedness.” So it seems a question to consider is: how do we participate in harm reduction while simultaneously working to overthrow and disrupt the neoliberal state?

The introduction and your individual essays paint a clear picture of Canada's history of assumed innocence, benevolence, and exceptionalism, and while Disrupting Queer Inclusion was in production, we saw the latest manifestation of that tradition with the passing of Bill C-51. What new threats to queer Black, Indigenous, and POC organizers in Canada does this law pose? What are the implications of this law on the security of the homonation?

Suzanne: I don't think Bill C-51 was a manifestation of Canada's assumed benevolence: the mythologies you speak of in your question were mobilized against Bill C-51. For instance, there was an anti-Bill C-51 rally here in Lethbridge that was very much about lamenting and protesting the loss of a certain type of imagining of Canada and the Canadian state with absolutely no acknowledgement of which bodies have been exempt from surveillance and which bodies have long been under surveillance prior to Bill C-51 – and how that's mediated by race, class, and gender. There is an extensive record of the RCMP, CSIS, and the Canadian military monitoring Indigenous peoples. One example
is the fracking protests in Elsipogtog in New Brunswick, where military counter-intelligence monitored Mi’kmaq protestors. Another is Aboriginal Affairs sifting through the status records of Cindy Blackstock, a well-known child welfare advocate. The parameters of this bill could even criminalize academics who do critical research.

And while I don’t want to minimize the shifts that Bill C-51 engendered, I was really dismayed at what I saw not only in Lethbridge but across social media platforms: this kind of amnesia or lack of knowledge about the ways in which surveillance is highly racialized. While the provisions are expanded and in some cases new, I think the state’s investment in surveillance – and surveilling some citizens over others – is not. I think it’s more helpful to see it in its historical continuity. This brings us back to homonationalism, which isn’t just an object or an epithet – “Oh you bad homonationalist queer” – it’s a field of power that brings together different sites of power and I think the security state is one of them.

OmiSoore: It’s part of a longer list of awful laws, starting with the Indian Act and Code Noir, alongside political processes that resulted in the disappearance of communities like Africville. This is part of a longer practice of not only surveillance, but also dispossession and displacement. It’s what makes current carding practices seem “necessary” (for the state). It’s part of that same spectrum and genealogy of surveillance.

I’m also thinking about the ways in which a normative gay community would support these practices of surveillance, even though queers were victims of these types of surveillance practices up until 1969 and beyond. This type of support for increased government surveillance facilitates gay people becoming full and normative Canadian citizens. Support for the targeting of “terrorists” to keep “them” out so that “we” are safe repeats the kinds of exclusionary and violent practices of the state. Yet, what happens is that one cannot imagine that these “othered-others” are also made queer – odd, unseemly, disturbing – and thus much too queer for inclusion.

How do you imagine the future of queer body policing in Canada?

OmiSoore: When I was thinking of this question, I was reminded of the kinds of queer body policing where queer and trans folks can be dismissed and erased for not being kink enough, femme enough, butch enough, too butch, too queer. In effect, how we understand these political positions are policed into the most neoliberal, simplistic iterations. Yet when I think of queer bodies and policing, I think of Mia Mingus when she points out that on one hand it’s good to say we no longer need the police – it is a system that must be disrupted and dismantled – but we must also speak about how we will respond to violence in our communities – what our alternatives are to policing and prisons. How do we even discuss the ways that settler colonialism works, and how anti-Black racism is involved in the construction of settler colonialism and then used against Black bodies as an accusation: “You’re a settler colonialist”? Or how anti-Africaness shows up in anti-Black racism.

Suzanne: And I think this is where location matters. There’s a different set of conversations happening in southern Alberta than in Toronto. After living in Lethbridge for seven years, I’ve realized how religious this part of Canada is and how deeply normative it is in terms of race and gender. The future of body policing is already here in southern Alberta: gender identity and sexuality are very prominent sites of gender policing by the state, particularly within the education system, but there are also very strong normative ideals of femininity and masculinity in Lethbridge, including for cisgender folks, that operate as a type of social policing and regulate feelings of belonging. So I think our locations inform each of our responses. In terms of future queer body policing, it’s interesting to think about how the individual body and social body are interconnected. The policing of the individual body is about the shaping and the forming of the social body and vice versa. The policing of the social body – of various “populations” – also then disciplines the individual body.

OmiSoore: Blood also continues to be a site of policing even with some of the changes that Canadian Blood Services is thinking of bringing in. Part of their trade-off is that if they no longer actually ban certain types of African blood, then maybe they can ask people to identify their ethno-racial origin and have them agree to use their blood in genomic testing. It is a back/frontdoor attempt to once again map the biological “truths” of race in/on/through blood. This is another level of policing the body of the queered other.
These types of attempts to again map race onto/into the body are obscured and unchallenged when the response to the exclusion of "gay blood" is to simply have Rainbow/Ally Blood Donor Clinics, where gay people encourage their families and friends to donate blood on their behalf. So instead of questioning the troubling unscientific, discriminatory practices within the donor system, the system is uncritically supported at the expense of the othered-others. This results in the continued degradation of Blackness and Black/African blood, perpetuating the beliefs that Blackness remains (rightfully) outside of the nation and a danger to the blood supply. This inability to think outside of these narrow articulations of belonging also becomes the way in which queered bodies are policed.

Can you think of examples of activist work that resists settling into a comfortable queer homonationalism? Work that is not distracted from transformative politics by state sanctioned inclusion?

Suzanne: The first thing that comes to my mind is that resistance is never on the outside of power. We cite M. Jacqui Alexander, who in Pedagogies of Crossing states that the question of how not to do state work in a moment of empire is one of the most crucial questions that we have to confront in living a transformative politic. We take this seriously, and understand "moment of empire" in the Canadian context to mean racialization structured by white supremacy, ongoing settler colonialism, neoliberalism as it operates with white supremacist settler capitalism, and the persistence of national mythologies that continue to position Canada as a land of freedom and peacekeeping. In putting together this book, we were inspired by José Esteban Muñoz's work on queering utopia, in which he writes that queerness is an insistence on potentiality for another world, on new and better pleasures, on other ways of being in the world. The chapters in our book engage with the very tasks that Alexander and Muñoz set out, foregrounding both activist work and analyses that resist a comfortable queer homonationalism yet attend to entangled relationships.

OmiSoore: Here I'm thinking of the work of Benedict Anderson and how he explains nation as limited, sovereign, and yet much too vast for us to intimately know one another so we must rely on our "imagined community." We wanted to consider other ways to think about how we belong in such imagined relationships and communities. The ways in which whiteness and hetero-patriarchy inform and frame the precariousness of inclusion makes one's belonging a fragile existence. Yet, as Audre Lorde has stated, revolution is not a one-time thing: we move through various political/social ativisms, hopefully to bring about something different and not repeat what has already been done. The work of Black, gay, lesbian, queer, trans activists in Toronto in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s informs the work of Black Lives Matter today and will inform black activism in the future. We are impacted: our consciousness, our identities, have been shifted, and hopefully these current moments are pulling us along to something new, something more transgressive, and into the next revolutionary moment.

I was also thinking about Chandra Mohanty and her article, "Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience," in which she cites Bernice Johnson Reagon's assertion that our participation in coalition is not about maintaining the status quo, it is the work of undoing — and we must be prepared, for we must also be undone.

Suzanne: I think she said that coalition work is some of the most dangerous work that we can do.

OmiSoore: It is, right? You will end one piece of coalition work and then need to go into another, so it is this continuing work of undoing, not only of oneself, because the only way for significant change to happen is to also be changed (I must thank Octavia Butler for this guidance). You can't stay the same and then expect things to just change around you. As Suzanne was saying before, the way in which the social and the individual work together, that's also the way that coalition work needs to be done and it is necessary for that very reason. Lots of people don't want to do that right now; I know my students don't want to. They're like, "What in the fuck are you doing? Why are you making me think of myself in this way?" It upsets them. I don't teach in a way that harms them (at least I hope not), but I really want them to look to see what is newly made available to them: something they didn't think was feasible or possible. And hopefully these realizations will encourage them to continue with this process over and over again.
Suzanne: Yes! I value the arrival of these moments in which students, however tentatively or whole-heartedly, allow themselves to become undone, to question the ground(s) they stand on.

OmiSoore: It's not easy. It's hard. But it's productive that what you relied on has failed you: it's in this potential for failure that I think some of the most transgressive work happens. This book was undoing for me; it's committed to that continual motion and refusing the static quo. We refuse the idea that there is one perfect answer because that means we're in a snow globe; we're not actually existing in a world that has seasons, that is in motion. ★

Notes
1. The proposed changes in this Act would a) recognize all parents equally – there will no longer be a distinction between the person who gives birth and the child’s other parents, b) recognize trans people and anyone who does not identify with the term “mother” on birth certificates by listing them as a parent, c) make it simpler for families who conceive with sperm from a known donor to register their child’s birth and be equally recognized immediately, and d) allow families with more than two parents to register the birth of their child and to be immediately and equally recognized.

2. Also known as the Anti-terrorism Act, Bill C-51 broadened the powers of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Passed in 2015, the new bill has implications for social movements and Indigenous direct action as it named disruptions to Canadian “critical infrastructure” and economic well being as security threats.

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