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Decolonising and Queering Praxis: The Unanswerable Questions for 'Queer Asia'

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PO-HAN LEE, AUG 17 2017

What does it mean by putting 'Queer' and 'Asia' together? This question – multiplied and thus complicated by several concepts – arose many times at occasions of the Queer Asia Conference held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London in mid-June 2017. Left with series of unanswerable questions, such as the presumption of nation/state, the discontent of sexual/national modernity, and the making of counterpublics, *Queer Asia* posts many challenges for both queer theory and postcolonialism. The Conference participants, including myself, have reified and (hopefully) resisted the White settler's dilemma of desiring modernity without the West that has haunted most parts of the world in all aspects (Bhabha, 1996; Mignolo, 2011), needless to say the production and operationalisation of gender equality, sexual rights and all sorts of queer knowledge (Gross, 2013).

This article, ruminating upon the observations and conversations at the Conference, would like to reflect the ambivalences and sort of intensions between people of diverse perceptions of modernisation and normalisation for or against queer existence. Therefore, by elaborating on three main series of debates, I consider the importance of destabilising, by repeatedly questioning, the 'concepts' we are familiar with. People in a postcolonialist position are vigilant and sometimes overcautious, and the 'decolonial queer praxis' (Hunt and Holmes, 2015), just like all kinds of decolonisation projects, is traumatising rather than entertaining. In fact, the questions around 'queer' plus 'Asia' became provocative as the conference went on, because the answers given by scholars and activists were diverse and context-sensitive, particularly in the panel discussions on: Decolonising Queer Theory, and Decriminalisation and Activism.

First Series of Questions: Redefining 'Nation-State'

The audience was alerted to the danger of statephobia. As Dr. Nikita Dhawan and others fairly consider, that there can be a fine line between state poison and medicine/counter-poison; indeed, many who are protected by states cannot afford statephobia. However, some may argue otherwise. For instance Dr. Nour Abu-Assab argued that a nation-state – or, a nationalism-based state – is even more dangerous when it is organised and only desired by privileged citizens; such an idea of nation-state casts out the undocumented/unwanted who are statelessness or homelessness. That is, the danger rests in the formulation of the state and the ideology and politics regarding 'identities' that it favourably maintains. Taking the discussion into state straightism against queer Indonesians, Dr. Ben Murtagh concluded: 'The state you are taught to love rejects you. That's a betrayal', and 'phobia' may be not a right term. 'Fear' it is.

Thus, we may rather bypass the discussion around the concept of 'state' first, and ask: Instead, what does it mean by 'queer'? For its people – or at least, most of them – a state means stabilisation, orderliness, and good governance, which is under control of people's will, but it may be practised strategically yet easier by casting out those who are ungovernable because they are rather uncontrollable, incomprehensible and thus undesirable – in short, because of their 'anti-normativity'. Hence, queerness is considered theoretically rather performative, fluid and subversive than 'stuck in identities that is politically and medically engineered' (Huffer, 2010: 1). In this light, queerness signifies the uncapturable and unpredictable trajectory of a gendered body and a sexual life – which is, perhaps understandably, against the ideals concerning sustainable development and productivity of a population, a culture and a state.

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Therefore, almost everyone within academia has tacitly come to an agreement on *queerness* as a deviation from the heteronormative (nation) and thus a fundamental challenge to international relations.

However, some were curious enough to ask: what does 'heteronormativity' mean in variable contexts, if we consider that queerness should be geo-historically contextualised? That is, how and when the preferred heterosexuality has been made scientific truth or social norms need case-by-case explorations, although the outcomes may look alike in appearance of modern states. Conversely, how has the 'queerness' of a state been utilised as a benchmark of democratisation and progressiveness in terms of a liberal society of tolerance? We have witnessed intriguing and somehow self-contradictorily phenomena such as the conflict between pro-queer Hinduism and homophobic Islamism, out of which emerged the accusation of 'fake hijras' for guaranteed employment as well as the Arabisation of LGBT activism respectively in South and West Asia(s).

Rather than asking what 'queer' means, since this is unsettled, what does 'non-queer' mean? More specifically, what does a 'heteronormative nation' mean? Is a nation-state presumptively or necessarily heteronormative? Following this question, there can be multiple follow-up questions. Is a nation-state necessarily heteronormative due to its desire for 'a permanent population' (Otto, 2007) – or, does it just happen to be heteronormative because this world has not seen any alternative? If heteronormativity is a requirement that a nation should fulfil, should we understand it as how we theorise 'queerness', which is constituted variably in different contexts? If so, how we define 'the heteronormative nation' becomes important. Of course, a state – or at least the statecraft in our contemporary modern form – is never value-free and non-violent as it claims/pretends even postcolonial ones (Weber, 2016; Cocks, 2014).

Someone among the audience warned: 'Don't fall into the trap that the pre-colonial societies are perfect', to which no direct answer was given. Wait a second! We just learned from Dr. Nadjie Al-Ali about the Kurdish feminists' revolutionary manifesto, which *genders* all political issues and places the struggle against patriarchy at the heart of their self-determination social movement. To queer something is to question the 'normalities' in our thoughts, words, practices and the time-spaces in which we are located. Based on this, queerness posits challenges to the everyday passive-aggressiveness against our desire to explore other possibilities about who 'We'/we are (Nash and Browne, 2016). That is, 'the possible does not pre-exist, it is created by the event...The event creates a new existence, it produces a new subjectivity (new relations with the body, with time, sexuality, the immediate surroundings, with culture...)' (Deleuze, 2007b: 234). In this light, testing the limits of the concept of nation-state, even with unanswerable interrogations, can lead to creativity rather than just destructivity.

Second Series of Questions: Querying Sexual Modernity

Then, we talked about the normalisation and identity categorisations, which are arguably perceived by many as a synonym of the Western form of 'modernisation', particularly in relation to the knowledge production and circulation of homosexuality and homophobia, gender identity and dysphoria, and so forth – all in the name of 'science'. So, we may wonder, for those who are against queer beings and lives, how do they justify the compatibility of criminalisation (perversion as sane offences) and medicalisation (perversion as mental insanities)? Yet, states do not just care about the logic. From this question, we may further identify the trajectory of 'modernity' – from theology to criminology and epidemiology, from mythology to biology and psychology – by observing the rampancy of anti-pornography law and the renaissance of censorship and conversion therapy against *LGBTQ* individuals in places such as Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, China, etc.

Nonetheless, for many activists fighting for LGBT rights, such political identifications, if they seek to trouble the status quo socially, politically and legally, are deemed plausibly relevant to the 'confrontation with old constraints, especially with the opening up of new public spaces' through the 'acknowledgment of the injustice and suffering of others' (Segal, 2008: 392). In fact, we may have observed and awaited the transformation of the body politic, which foresees 'the nation itself changes sexes' (Zabus, 2014: 214) by reconfiguring itself to be queer-friendly. However, an activist from China stated that the question lies in the affordability of deconstructive utopianism for local queer communities. Maybe, to some extent, the identitarian politics still matters, particularly considering the mobilisation of the precarious strategically, which nevertheless requires a 'deeper engagement with *the ethics of pluralism* as a method of ordering

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international relations' (Rao, 2010: 74).

This is how we arrived at the discussion around queer migrants (from Asian societies) in Europe, who are exposed to the juxtapositions and unsurprising consistencies of xenophobia and queerphobia that embody the internal conflicts between individuals and their cultural backgrounds and the external ones between themselves and the new societies in which they struggle to settle down. The assimilation project under the banner of multiculturalism presents to them not an invitation to cohabit but the imposition of the imagined 'white' figures of liberalist ideologies, which are themselves a result of a mixed and still transforming culture. Interestingly, the metamorphosis of white supremacy, internalised by other parts of the world, has co-contributed to sexual racism out of queer encounters and representations between the White men and Asians (Nguyen, 2014) and between Asians of different colours/ethnicities to naturalise 'racial aesthetic hierarchies' as sexual preferences/tastes, as argued in the session on (S)expats and (S)expectations.

Third Series of Questions: Assembling the Counterpublics

From the courtrooms to our bedrooms, from queer diaspora to local LGBT/queer activism, from the development of intersex rights in South Asia to the tensions between secularism and feminism in West Asia, the audience was led to rethink and delineate the 'publics' and 'counterpublics' for both queers and Asians. Counterpublics, according to Michael Warner (2002: 63), are 'formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion'. In response to the Habermasian public as a single and cohesive entity that excludes the interests of participants outlawed (explicitly or potentially) from deliberative democracy, mass publics and counterpublics, both in a pluralist sense, are 'both damaged forms of publicness, just as gender and sexuality are, in this culture, damaged forms of privacy' (see also Fraser, 1992).

These publics include, but are not limited to, the 'self-creating public' (ibid: 53), for example, the cases studies offered in panel on Reclaiming Publics, such as non-commercial queer online micro-films (China), small talks in Bangkok's gay bathhouses or queer bookshops in Chiang Mai (Thailand), transgender and queer people's gatherings on street (India) etc. Dialectically, the counterpublics are thus possibly actualised 'in a state of lived experience, and these states bring the event about' (Deleuze, 2007a: 388), where we are positioned to act upon and think of queer, feminine appearances as vulnerability when getting involved in – personally or impersonally – 'a deliberate risk of exposure' (Butler, 2015: 140). To some extent, this is how political mobilisations and transnational collaborations become possible, aiming at the organisation of the counterpublics through self-representation (or exactly, self-exposure) against the assembled and concerted racism/sexism.

Almost every session concluded with a question. Is there/should there be a perfect way of *doing* feminist, LGBT (or queer) activism – within, beyond, or bypassing state apparatuses? This question can be both epistemological and practical in terms of being 'critical' and 'useful'. Are the evaluations and the theories on which they are based necessarily (non-)West? Alternatively, are all the Western/white experiences imperialist? In what way can resistance to sexual and racial colonisation remain effective and emancipatory? In the age of irreversible globalisation, we, rather than targeting the imagined 'West', must acknowledge the ineluctable hybridisation, and retain our agency, as many speakers throughout the Conference reminded us, being critical at all times of both our self-inscribed cultural parochialism and the presumed universalism.

To re-imagine the world with a critical lens may not be enough for prompting a radical change, as Joan Cocks fairly remarks, if in the absence of 'a struggle to democratize material as well as cultural power and to forge new political institutions for exercising it without sovereign aspirations, delusions, or pretensions'. Thus, how can we redefine 'Asia' by recognising the complexity, irreducibility and unevenness between Asias/Asians – with the highlights of the 'liveability' and counterpublics constituted by queer and other outcast populations rather than the focus on the 'states' themselves, their developmental and economic conditions, their centralised legislations and policies? Or, in contemporary terms of human rights law, for instance, the process and outcome indicators should receive more attention than the structural ones in the way they deserve.

Conclusion (Not Necessarily With an Answer)

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The series of queries may enable the coalition – or assemblage – of *Queer Asia* not just to seek queerness in the region of Asia but also to queer Asia per se. In this light, to queer, as a verb (*doing* rather than *being*), is 'a deconstructive practice focused on challenging normative knowledges, identities, behaviors, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions' (Hunt and Holmes, 2015: 156). Take, for example, *Queer Asia*. It is considered preferably as 'a practice of concepts' in a Deleuzian sense, identifying White settler colonialism, destabilising the (postcolonial) nation-state thinking, and challenging the gender and sexual norms legitimised by 'modern' juridical and medical judgments it depends on.

In the light of the wariness of contemporary political-cultural conjuncture, especially for sexual and gender minorities, the denial of access to a liveable life has been legitimated by both the so-called 'homo-internationalism' and its counterpart 'homophobia-nationalism' – intriguingly, both in the name of decolonisation. The former presents a globalist project to decolonise our 'Selves' (encompassing bodies, identities and desires against hetero-patriarchy) (Symons and Altman, 2015; Langlois, 2015). And, the latter magnifies the essence of 'nation' (based on the discursive practices concerning the continuity and homogeneity of a population against a propaganda/conspiracy that is perceived as a threat to 'Our' sustainability) (Butler and Spivak, 2007; Rao, 2014).

The foremost message I took home from *Queer Asia*, which can be seen as a coalitional and networked platform for transnational activism and anti-imperial critiques, is that we can never take our own perceptions and interpretations of 'queerness' or 'Asian-ness' for granted. Perhaps, the lines of force deployed by the complicit matrices might have permeated, infiltrated and controlled our lives and minds as well as our imaginaries of the state to which we belong and the territories that are circumscribed for (or taken from) us. Nonetheless, we can, both in theory and in practice, practise the 'decolonial queer praxis' in everyday life and academic identity, and hopefully keep, self-critically and reciprocally, the emancipatory force of both queer theory and postcolonialism – no matter what the discipline, even though most of the time they engender unanswerable questions.

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