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The Violence of Essentialism

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During the 2017 London Pride parade, the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) marched with placards emblazoned with slogans such as “Islam is homophobic,” “Allah is gay,” “End Islamic Hatred and Violence to Gays,” “Islamophobia is an oxymoron” and “East London Mosque incites murder of LGBTs” (Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain 2017a). The organisation is the British branch of the Central Council of Ex-Muslims, a German association representing former Muslims or “apostates”. CEMB are a self-described group of “non-believers, atheists, and ex-Muslims” committed to “taking stand for reason, universal rights, and secularism” (Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain 2017b). Deliberately provocative, the intervention was made in the name of LGBT people subjugated by anti-homosexuality laws by countries under “Islamic rule” and by Muslim homophobia in the UK. More broadly, CEMB’s political mobilisations are motivated by their staunch belief of the threat that Islam in particular poses to universal rights, particularly women and LGBT rights. There are obvious queer feminist criticisms to be made of CEMB’s articulations of queer secularity (Khan 2020), the questionable locations of homophobia (Rao 2014), and the exceptionalisation of gendered, homophobic and sexualised violence within the amorphous “Muslim community” (El Tayeb 2013; Farris 2017; Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2017). I want to forgo this line of critique and dwell instead on the essentialisms at the heart of this mobilisation of the religion/secular divide: the politics it effects and precludes. What can the violence of essentialism—both the violence it fixates on and the violence it inflicts—reveal about the relationship between religion and gender? I suggest that investigating essentialist mobilisations of religion and gender, not as analogy nor as comparison but as relational politics, may complicate our analyses of gender, religion, and their interconnections.

The following year, another spectacle unravelled at the same setting, one under a different political register but bearing kindred essentialist claims. A lesbian group, *Get the L Out*, carried banners stating slogans such as “transactivism erases lesbians” and protesting alleged “anti-lesbianism” (Gabbatiss 2018). The

small group handed out flyers bearing transphobic messages, eventually laying down their bodies at the front of the parade, bringing it to a standstill. Both interventions hinged on the threat of gendered and sexual violence yet remain steadfast in their denial of the violence that is immanent to and inflicted by their essentialising politics. Vanja Hamzić aptly explains how acts of spectacular representation in the name of certain minoritized subjects tend to be destitute of any meaningful politics: “the (real) lives of the subjects of such representational acts are always already irrelevant; what matters is the spectacle itself” (Hamzić 2016, 180). CEMB’s culturally essentialist understanding of Islam and Muslims and their dismissal of the realities of islamophobia contradict their claims of solidarity with Muslim women and queers. Correspondingly, Alyosxa Tudor deftly analyses how the transphobic politics deployed by *Get the L Out* relies not only on an essentialist notion of gender but essentialist notions of the location of sexual violence as well (Tudor 2020, 364). The overdetermination of violence to a singular source (Islam in the first case, trans women in the second) betrays a single-issue politics that is both unwilling and unable to reckon with the contradictions and violent implications of its myopia. In their analysis of the 2018 intervention, Tudor powerfully points out the irony of a group of lesbians protesting trans women as the ‘biggest threats’ to feminism in a corporate LGBT+ event laden with the presence of police and army personnel: “Not only does such a move favour a transphobic history of lesbian feminism over an anti-war, anti-police, anti-capitalist one, it also tells a story of lesbian feminism as not being able to address transnational forms of violence, including sexual violence through imperialist wars” (2020, 364).

The ostensibly “feminist” instrumentalisation of the secular/religion and man/woman binaries both rely on an obfuscation of the racial and colonial origins of these Manichean politics and a simplistic projection of a victim and oppressor divide. These politics are ill-equipped to contend with the reality that neither secularism nor womanhood (indeed, sex itself) are immutable, neutral, apolitical or ahistorical categories, but instead norms that have congealed over time through the “scattered hegemonies” inherent to modernity (Grewal and Kaplan 2014). Rather than analogise, compare, or equivocate these essentialisms, I want to instead suggest that an analysis of their convergence holds productive possibility for understandings of the dynamic between religion and gender. What do our queer and feminist politics stand to gain from a relational understanding between the violence of cultural essentialism and the violence of gender essentialism? Indeed, what is the relationship between both?

Religion and gender are both sites of contestation for Western anxieties that are always already racial in their nature. While there is a broad range of scholarly inquiry on this thesis, less explored is how the mobilisations of cultural

and gender essentialism set the terrain for seemingly unlikely alliances. An interrogation of this convergence can help us make sense of, for instance, how 'secular' and 'inclusive' feminist organisations can maintain support of transphobic organisations (Southhall Black Sisters 2020) and *also* express scepticism towards abolitionist struggle (Gupta 2020) that aims to eradicate carceral violence. Rather than disparate political positions, the language and tactics of both transphobia and particularly Western European deployments of anti-Islamic secular hostility overlap in their insistence of the victimisation of these political positions, both occurring at the detriment of a rigorous analysis of power and an expansive feminist imagination. As such, these alliances become not so unlikely when we understand that the trivialisation of 'phobias' of the trans- and islamo-variety rely on a colonial division of humanity, whereby to be Human is to be secular and gendered in the image of European Man (Lugones 2007, Wynter 2003). Even though the articulation of the threat posed by Muslims often uses the language of queer- and transphobia, the articulators of these discourses tend to have much in common with the repressive politics that the objects of their anxieties are accused of possessing.

Shifting focus for a moment to contemporary anti-trans mobilisations across the Atlantic, an analysis of their language and tactics demonstrates the often-contradictory enmeshment of these essentialisms. While in the UK the language of secular humanism structures the defence of Islamophobia and transphobia, Jules Gill-Peterson's analysis of a recent anti-transgender bill in North Dakota demonstrates how trans people are accused of violating the secular terms of public participation by simultaneously adhering to the religion of "secular humanism" and embodying a "nonsecular sham" (2021). Here, Gill-Peterson observes how the language of religious neutrality is exploited to vilify a host of non-Christian identities, including trans people, Muslims and Jews. Gill-Peterson aptly points out that these contemporary manifestations of sex panics are inseparable from a history of racialised policing. This point is not dissimilar to Rahul Rao's expansion of Anne Marie Smith's argument that queerphobic moral panics are prefigured by earlier racist moral panics (Rao 2020, 129). In our interrogations of the violence of these essentialisms, we may do well to pay attention to how disparate deployments of the secular/religious dualism can occur in the service of transphobic politics. Moreover, it is worth exploring how these interrelated processes are constituted by and perpetuate a legacy of colonial and racialised exclusion.

My intention with this brief provocation is to lay out what I believe to be under-explored dynamics in the relationship between religion and gender. By confronting the violence of essentialism, the claims of violence it clings to and the violence immanent to these claims, feminist and queer theorisations

of religion and gender can elucidate the very relationality that these political mobilisations seek to collapse. Attending to this relationality can also reveal the existence of coalitions and conviviality, pleasures and positionalities that these essentialisms render unthinkable. Tudor aptly points out how exclusive feminist fixations on sexual violence foreclose the possibilities of political 'pleasure' and 'desire': "For many feminists, the fight against sexual violence is the point of departure for their politicisation and solidarity, and yet a lot of us choose activism and forms of knowledge production that have the ability to theorise, define and value the role pleasure plays for both gender and sexuality" (2020, 374). The essentialist politics critiqued above represent a dearth of imagination in their inability to conceive of religion, gender, and encounters between the two that can enable conviviality and solidarity. Jules Joanne Gleeson has argued for understanding gender transition through the lens of community-led social reproduction, the "day-in-day-out work of cultural fabrication and mutual support that allows for trans life," a communality that is unintelligible within the register of sex panics (Gleeson 2020). Likewise, Kay Gabriel emphasises the necessity of "the political valence of pleasure" in our gender politics, whereby "the liberatory horizon of a pleasurable, disalienated life matters to transsexuals and non-transsexuals both" (2020). Following these scholars' considerations, how can we articulate feminist visions of a disalienated life, one that is expansive enough to pay attention to the ways in which gender, religion and the interplay between the two are not simply sites of violence or ambivalence but one of relational pleasures as well? The intellectual and political contributions of academic journals such as *Religion and Gender* may pave the way for scholars to foreground these questions.

Over the course of my own research on queer Muslims, it is such ephemeral moments of relationality that have enabled my own desire for a feminist politics that is not solely arrested by the registers of violence and suffering of the here and now but also invested in the liberatory horizons of a "then and there" (Muñoz 2009). I am reminded of the members of Feminist Anti-Fascist Assembly standing guard outside the Inclusive Mosque Initiative's (IMI) jummah prayers, Halaqas, and iftars, a commitment of solidarity made to the intersectional feminist mosque in the wake of the Christchurch Massacre in New Zealand, where a white supremacist fatally shot over fifty mosque-goers in 2019. The scene of people breaking their fasts at IMI iftars, many of whom are queer and trans Muslims, while volunteers distributed plates of iftari to Assembly members, made up of feminists of all genders, is an example of the conviviality and solidarity that is beyond the imaginative faculties of those whose political commitments hinge on the violence of essentialism.

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