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# Di Mana Bumi Dipijak, Di Situ Pelangi Dijunjung

## Migration West and the Spatio-Temporal Configuration of Queer Malaysian Identities in London

**ABSTRACT:** This paper is concerned with understanding the complex tensions between national and queer identity in the context of migration, especially migration from the postcolony towards the imperial core; here, issues of modernity, progress, and futurity become contested when the possibility for a queer way of being is made available within the colonial metropole. Using approaches at the intersection of nationalism, queer theory, and postcolonialism, I specifically focus on queer Malaysians in London, and the ways migration towards a ‘liberating’ West has informed the articulation of their nationality and sexualities. After conducting five semi-structured interviews with queer Malaysian migrants, I conclude that moving to London has configured these identities along spatial and temporal lines, where queerness is rendered a new kind of present and potential future, whilst Malaysian identity remains a spectre from a ‘repressive’ past. Given the underlying assemblages of homonationalism and Western hegemony that subsume queerness under the tent of Western values, progression, modernity, and futurity are made available through the internalisation of a Western queer politics and the formation of new (homo)national affiliations.

**KEYWORDS:** temporality; migration, queer; postcolonialism; nationalism; geography, social

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper is a play on the Malay proverb *di mana bumi dipijak, di situ langit dijunjung* which roughly translates to *whatever earth you land on, that is the sky you carry*, referring to the importance of obeying the laws and customs of the lands and places we visit. I replace the word *langit*, which means sky, with the Malay word for rainbow — *pelangi*, a symbol for queerness emerging out of gay rights movements in the West. The original meaning of the proverb is changed, alluding to a process of reconfiguration in which queerness, as defined within a Western paradigm, becomes prioritised as the queer migrant travels towards the imperial core. Within the postcolony, queerness is often depicted as a figure representing

the threat of Western encroachment and the collapse of traditional values (SHAH 2013; CHEAH 2020; MUNIANDY 2012; LEE 2012), whilst in the imperial core, queerness — at least with regard to gay and lesbian subjects — has become a symbol for progress and Western hegemony (AHMED 2011; RAO 2014, 2015, 2020; PUAR 2015).

Queerness in Malaysia is treated as a deviant form of Western culture threatening Malaysian norms and values (MUNIANDY 2012; LEE 2012). Many point out the irony of this, considering the fact that Section 377 of Malaysia's penal code, the law targeting carnal intercourse against the order of nature including homosexual activity, is a product of British colonial intervention. Yet, Shanon Shah asserts that the issue is not with the code itself as “a larger political and cultural climate makes it one of many other laws and directives hostile towards diverse expressions of gender and sexuality” (2013: 266). This had a lot to do with the rhetoric of Asian values permeating both Malaysian and Singaporean political discourses during the 80s and 90s (SHAH 2013; LEE 2012). LGBT rights and issues became a site through which Malaysian identity was questioned as it sought to threaten the ‘traditional’ values underpinning Malaysian society (MUNIANDY 2012; LEE 2012). Alongside this, these laws have intertwined with politically intensified Islamic values based on, what Shah argues, “19th-century colonial legal constructions to regulate the ‘Muslim’ other” (2013: 268). As such, Malaysia takes on a self-orientalising register in its rejection of queerness, ultimately highlighting the relationship queerness has to Western modernity within our global imaginaries.

This occurs alongside mainstream queer scholarship's complicity in replicating the technologies and agenda of U.S. empire given its emergence from those institutions (ENG *et al.* 2005). We can see this in the advancement of rights on behalf of ‘Third World’ sexual minorities, wherein a language of civility and sexual modernity is employed to justify the ‘gift’ of intervention (AHMED 2011). Here, the non-West is fixed as regressive in these imaginaries, whose sexual otherness is now juxtaposed against the Occident's gay and lesbian subjects to legitimise its enlightenment as it incorporates queerness into its hegemony (ALI 2017; SÄLTENBERG 2016). Orientalist tropes of anteriority are thus cast onto nations who fail to grant rights to gay and lesbian subjects, in which queerness serves to represent whiteness and its associated meanings of ‘modernity’ and ‘civilisation’ (PUAR 2015; AHMED 2011; RAO 2014, 2015, 2020).

For this reason, my core aims are to understand the role of geopolitics and dislocation in the formations and transformations of identities, as well as the mechanisms through which they might occur. As such, my research approaches this subject using theoretical and empirical work at the intersection of nationalism, queer theory, and postcolonialism to uncover the different ways queer people have understood their place in the nation, and how this is complicated when migration is thrown into the picture, where national affiliations become even more contested. I argue that by migrating to the colonial metropole, new possibilities of queerness are offered to queer Malaysian migrants given the underlying discourses of homonationalism and Western hegemony. By entering the alternative national space of Great Britain – particularly London – not only are they able to prioritise their queer identities, access to a new present and potential future is made available to them. Therefore, I also view the queer migrant travelling towards the colonial West from the postcolony as a kind of time-traveller, moving forwards in time as they enter an alternative national space capable of accommodating their queerness and, by extension of that, modernity and futurity. Despite the limited scope of my exploration, I hope to contribute to further sociological discussions concerning the relationship between sexuality and nationality through a postcolonial and geopolitical lens.

## 2. NATIONS AND SEXUALITIES: IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT

Most theoretical work done on queers and their nationalities alludes to an antagonistic relationship between the two, where the nation-state is postured as an anti-queer formation (KINSMAN 1987). As in many countries, sexuality is a physical fact that is socially organised by regulations imported from either Great Britain or America, which has ultimately incorporated anti-homosexual ordinances as part of the state's vision (GOLDIE 2000). Such was the case for the Queer Nation, conceptualised as a means of fostering a new sense of peoplehood outside the traditional model of the nation (WALKER 1997) defined in two ways: as a community that supersedes the traditional nation-state, positing a greater tie between two homosexuals than a homosexual and a heterosexual of the same state, or one that is ironic, subverting the image of what the nation-state is by queering certain elements (GOLDIE 2000). However, the tension between queerness and nationality is not as clear-cut and are far more racialised than previously theorised.

Historically, sexuality occupied a prominent space in the colonial imagination: difference, categories, and hierarchies across racial and cultural lines were constructed according to the moralistic standards of the West to legitimise colonial intervention (MEIU 2015). Take, for example, Southeast Asia, hailed by many anthropologists as a kind of queer paradise given the region's proclivity for non-normative gender and sexual norms (CHEAH 2020). Western visitors often made remarks about the 'barbarism' of 'Asiatic races' to justify their civilising missions and colonial incursions to Southeast Asia, typically along the lines of gender and sexual non-conformity amongst many other things (JACKSON 2003). This moral imperative to civilise the non-normative sexualities of the colonised world ultimately led to the introduction of [Western] heteronormativity through legal reform. For the former colonies of Great Britain, including Malaysia, the lingering effects of such incursions still exist in their penal codes and legal systems, taking the form of a Section 377 designed to target carnal intercourse against the order of nature, referring mainly to anal and oral sex, but is typically targeted at homosexual activity. (ALI 2015; BROWNELL 2009; CHEAH 2020). Whilst we could easily incriminate Great Britain for the criminalisation of homosexuality, we cannot ignore the role postcolonial elites played in the maintenance of such laws. In Malaysia, the state's rhetoric of 'Asian values' have fused with political Islam in order to cement diplomatic alliances with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, who stand opposed to LGBTQ rights as part of its collective rejection of 'Western ideals' to ensure the Malay community would fit the moralistic mould of its prospective political allies (SHAH 2013; CHEAH 2020). As such, these colonial legacies have fundamentally transformed postcolonial states' approaches to, and readings of, gender and sexual diversity, associating it with Western visions of modernity. Relatedly, many critical queer scholars have argued that sexuality's discursive coloniality is still alive – this time around, sexual non-conformity has become co-opted by the hegemony of 'Western values' (AHMED 2011; RAO 2014, 2015; PUAR 2015; SÄLTENBERG 2016).

In our current global imaginaries, queerness represents the new barometer for the evaluation of national legitimacy in the contemporary arena of politics (PUAR 2015; AHMED 2011; RAO 2014, 2015; ALI 2017). Jasbir Puar developed the conceptual framework of homonationalism, in which acceptance for gay and lesbian subjects has become a measure of national sovereignty reliant on:

...the shoring up of the respectability of homosexual subjects in relation to the performative reiteration of the pathologised perverse (homo- and hetero-) sexuality of racial others, specifically Muslim others, upon whom Orientalist and neo-Orientalist projections are cast. (2015: 321)

As an extension of homonationalism beyond its borders and into foreign territories, gay imperialism seeks to justify intervention through the mobilisation of sexual freedom, liberation, and rights through a modern-day civilising mission predicated on the assimilation – and annihilation – of non-Western cultures (ALI 2017; RAO 2014, 2015; AHMED 2011). Imperial truths tied to specific places and, by extension, peoples are produced and captured as a result: take, for example, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association's (ILGA) mapping of the world according to sexual orientation laws, which disproportionately targets non-European/non-Western nations without any acknowledgement of their disparate histories of colonialism – from which most of these laws originate – casting these places, and their 'kind,' as being temporally and culturally fixed, inferior, and incompatible with 'Western values' (ALI 2017). These discourses ultimately constitute Western nationality as inherently more accommodating of queer identities and therefore more desirable than others. Queerness in this context could therefore be viewed as a metonym for whiteness and its other associated meanings such as modernity and civility (RAO 2020).

Queer diasporas in particular have “become a concerted site for the interrogation of the nation-state, citizenship, imperialism, and empire” by shifting “critical attention to the incommensurabilities of sexuality and national belonging” (ENG *et al.* 2005: 7-8). They illuminate the contradictions of the 'queer-friendly,' liberal West, and the kinds of (im)mobilities it makes available to prospective queer citizens. White's account of Canadian immigration regimes highlights the way they grant mobility to same-sex families who can be read as productive “bio-citizens” by rounding up queer subjectivities under the “tent of nationalised identities” (2013: 40-41). Such a [white] queer paradigm treats sexuality as yet another multicultural category to be managed under a state apparatus (WALCOTT 2007). It is not surprising, then, that a [Western] queer national politics is defined by an assumed middle-classness, maleness, and whiteness of its citizens (WALCOTT 2007), where any call for diversity is a call to assimilate into and reinforce whiteness (AHMED 2011). Hence,

homonationalist visions of citizenship tend to benefit the queer subject that doesn't threaten the Western state's racial order: it is inevitable that the only modes of citizenship it makes available to the non-Western queer is one where they must prioritise normative modes of [Western] queerness over their racial identities.

### 3. FRAMING QUEER MIGRATIONS

For Anzaldúa (1987), the Mexican queer and/or woman is seen as a transgressor in both her native and dominant culture — the dominant culture here being the host society and the native culture the sending-society, which is the case for Mexican-Americans who have been re-categorised as migrants when the US border crossed their land. Whilst the migrant has a complicated relationship with their new place of residence, the queer migrant also faces a sense of estrangement to their motherland. Anzaldúa aptly calls homophobia the “fear of going home” (1987: 20), wherein one's sexuality is a beast that must be pushed into the shadows to avoid rejection from the mother culture, leading me to question the ways migration complicates the queer migrant's relationship to their nationality and sexuality.

Studies have pointed to how one's geographical location offers up different possibilities of being by providing particular cultural scripts, discourses, and structures that provide a language through which they can make sense of these identities (EGUCHI 2014; HUDSON and MEHROTRA 2015; MCCOY-TORRES 2018). For Acosta (2008), it is the distance that Latina lesbians have from their families after migrating to the US that allowed them to be open with their queer identities. However, many of these migrants are also subjected to new racial hierarchies from within the host-nation, resulting in a need to form solidarity across ethnic lines (ACOSTA 2008), or perform their cultural Otherness (EGUCHI 2014; MANALANSAN 2003), as a means of re-asserting their homeland identities in white, [homo]normative spaces. Hence, the queer migrant is situated within a borderland of their host-nation, wherein their affiliations to the homeland are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated in different ways (ANZALDÚA 1987; ACOSTA 2008), but what remains constant throughout these accounts is the possibility of a queer way of being within the host-nation that was previously unavailable in the homeland.

To re-iterate Puar's (2015) homonationalism, the narrative of gay rights

shores up the respectability of the homosexual subject through the pathologisation of racial others, upon whom orientalist projections are imposed. Thus, the complicity of Western queer politics with a state project casts sexual freedom as a cultural attribute of the West, while the opposite is cast onto the Orient (AHMED 2011). In fact, representations of queer intimacy can sometimes act as a means of permeating national borders within immigration regimes that round up queer subjectivities under the umbrella of nationalised identities, as these relationships gain recognition within new national contexts (WHITE 2013). Furthermore, Shaksari emphasises the reductive nature of queer refugee claims in Turkey as their queerness is fixed into “timeless and immutable identities” to legitimise their progression towards a “future-oriented” and “rightful” Europe (2014: 999). This hyper-fixation on the queer migrant’s sexuality over other components of their identity echoes Sältenberg’s postulation:

While the sexual part of the queer migrant identity is linked to hegemonic notions of progress and Western values, the racial part of that same identity suffers from the negative consequences of a Eurocentric world-order. (2016: 53)

As a result, queer identities become mobilised as a trait of Western modernity, wherein the queer migrant’s sexual liberation feels like progress under the pretence of Western hegemony. It comes to no surprise, then, that in accounts of queer migration and refuge, the intelligibility of sexuality over race/culture is prevalent: the hegemonic Westernisation of queerness makes it a currency that facilitates permeability through Western borders, contrasted against the migrants’ racial/cultural background.

In line with Doreen Massey’s (2005) assertion that space and identity are co-constitutional, spatiality here is central to the kinds of configurations we are seeing amongst queer migrants: how they experience the spaces they came from and the spaces they enter [and now reside in] play a role in the constitution of their queer and national identities. Similarly, these identities also shape the ways they experience and construct realities within these spaces. As such, attention should be given to the conditions which give rise to the spatialities that make queerness a possibility in one geographical location over another, and the kinds of political work being done. Yet, when bringing in questions of space into the analysis of queer migrations and identities, we must also recognise that questions of time and temporality, as it is experienced/constructed, cannot be untangled

from these narratives. It is here that I place the work of Doreen Massey, Stuart Hall, and José Muñoz in conversation with one another.

For Massey (2005), temporality, the processes of continual change, is as intrinsic to space as identity is. She argues that our linear concept of time and progress has been historically centred around Europe, who embodies the apex of this temporal continuum, ultimately setting the standard through which modernity and futurity are evaluated. In *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall (1990) outlines the necessary deferral of Caribbean identity that occurs as a result of displacement, a kind of future that comes out of a shift in space, rendered possible by uneven power relations and structural violences. At the same time, José Muñoz views queerness through the lens of Utopian hermeneutics, in which queerness comes to be seen as horizon, not quite in the present, but related to the past:

To see queerness as a horizon is to perceive it as a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold that I describe as straight time is interrupted or stepped out of. Ecstatic time is signalled at the moment one feels ecstasy, announced perhaps in a scream or grunt of pleasure, and more importantly during moments of contemplation when one looks back at a scene from one's past, present, or future (2009: 32)

It could be argued that for many queer migrants, the horizon of queerness becomes seemingly available when moving towards the future-oriented West and away from the 'backwards' and 'regressive' homeland, evaluated in terms of hegemonic notions of sexual freedom, especially when a Western queer and liberal politics becomes the barometer for which queer liberation is measured. In this instance, queerness is thus necessarily deferred and rendered possible with a shift in space. For this reason, I view the queer migrant as not only travelling through space as they travel from the postcolony and into the colonial metropole, but also travelling through time, moving towards the future as they enter the space of modernity.

#### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

I conducted five semi-structured interviews with queer Malaysians who are currently living in London but have also spent a significant portion of their lives in Malaysia. I specifically chose this sample population primarily because I myself am a queer Malaysian in London which made



accessing this population much more convenient and practical, but also because London is a metropolitan capital of the colonial centre that is typically viewed as being liberal and ‘queer-friendly’ – by comparing the ways my participants make sense of their queer and national identities in these two different contexts, I hope to understand the way they experience these spaces, and the power relations shaping such experiences. This is where a semi-structured approach proved useful: it allowed for probing and flexibility, as well as clarification throughout the interview process, enriching the depth of my findings (PATTON 2002), while also providing room for new meanings and concepts to emerge outside of the extant theoretical and empirical literature (GALLETA 2013). My participants were able to articulate their relationship to their identities in a clear and segmented way that allowed me to connect these narratives to their spatial experiences.

As my interviews were structured in a way that encouraged my participants to produce their own narratives. These aren’t faithful reproductions of the past, but rather, meaningful re-imaginings of it, in connection to how they experience the world (REISSMAN 1994). Hence, I have utilised a narrative analytical strategy to make sense of my participants’ understandings of space, time, and identity, typically involving the construction of texts for close inspection and interpretation (*ibid*). As such, I produced transcripts for each interview where I then took a thematic approach to my analysis, grouping together common themes across all of my participants’ narratives to find meaning in the contents of their speech (*ibid*). These themes were then developed into codes to be applied for later analyses of the raw data (GUEST *et al.* 2014).

The sample population consisted of two bisexual women and three gay men, all of whom were currently studying at prominent universities in London, that I found by employing a combination of purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling strategies. As a queer Malaysian living in London myself, I had some contacts I already knew fit the criteria for participation and were willing to talk openly about their sexuality. I also happened to be involved with student-run organisations aimed at fostering a community of queer students of colour in London at the time – knowing that a significant amount of students in London also happened to be international, I was able to find participants who fit my criteria by advertising my study on these networks. However, given how hard-to-reach the sample population

was, I then had to rely on snowballing to expand my list of participants via those I had already sampled.

Hence, I would like to acknowledge that as a result of the sample population's hard-to-reach nature and the sensitivity of the research topic, I inevitably had to exclude participants from other social classes, migrant statuses, sexual orientations, gender identities and ethnic groups [all my participants were Malaysian-Chinese] for practicality's sake. For this reason, the perspectives being shared are skewed towards a very particular experience. Despite this, I hope that my findings could still provide a solid enough foundation for additional research on queer Malaysians to be conducted, inviting further investigation on how class, ethnicity, gender identity and migrant status might complicate these narratives.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.I. NEW SPATIALITIES, NEW TEMPORALITIES

A recurring theme in my participant accounts is the idea that London, as a constructed and experienced space, has given my participants the opportunity to come to terms with their queerness – it is often described as a place that is “open”, allowing room to explore and connect to their queer identities in ways that were previously unavailable to them whilst living in Malaysia. As such, new ways of being are then made possible in relation to the spaces my participants exist in, as was the case with the following participant:

So I only really came to terms with my sexuality after 2014 so that was after I moved to the UK. So I didn't really have the chance to explore much of what it's like being queer in Malaysia. I'm not sure if it has anything to do with my age or where it was, like...but I think the UK has a huge part of it...

This is in part due to the new kinds of cultural scripts surrounding sexuality made available in a space like London, inevitably providing my participants with an avenue to (re)connect with an identity that was forcibly repressed in Malaysia. In this case, discourses surrounding queerness and homosexuality that are available in a new, alternative, space like London forges a newfound connection to a queer identity that was, as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) would describe, pushed into the shadows to avoid rejection from the Mother culture. Similar to Stuart Hall's (1990) ideas regarding the deferral of identity as a result of displacement, a kind of deferral happens

in this instance — whilst the deferral in Hall’s account happens at the point of displacement, deferral in this context starts from within the homeland, and it is at the point of dislocation where the constitution of a queer identity commences. Therefore, the constitution of a legible queer identity is delayed up until the point my participants gain entry into a space that can render what was once unavailable to them, a possibility.

Furthermore, I asked each participant how the relationship to their identities might have changed with the distance from Malaysia. An appreciation for certain aspects of Malaysian culture is often brought up, in spite of their critical stance towards its politico-legal systems. As one participant puts it, “absence makes the heart grow fonder”. Although the distance from the homeland permitted a new possibility for queerness, this same distance has also induced a fondness towards the cultural side of their Malaysian identity, articulated as kind of nostalgia. For one participant, it is precisely this distance from the homeland that has allowed her to disassociate her Malaysian identity as an expression of cultural and national belonging from the anti-queer legal apparatus of the state:

I think being away from Malaysia has allowed me to consolidate my identities because when I am not living directly under that oppression and having to hide that I am LGBT+ I can appreciate more of the positives of being Malaysian. It is easier to really enjoy the things I do like about the country when I don’t have to deal with these overarching difficulties that I had to in the past. Being away helps me see Malaysia as more than its politics and conservative values.

It can be said then that the distance from the homeland has provided some of my participants with room for what Muñoz (1999) would term disidentification, in which a dominant ideology is neither assimilated or opposed, but rather, worked on and against to enact permanent change within a cultural logic. In this instance, a cultural logic of citizenship is worked on and against within the context of a new, alternative, space. However, this was not a sentiment shared by the majority of my participants, and even amongst the ones who did find some sense of pride in being Malaysian, they still believed that their queerness will always come into conflict with their nationality, and any attempt at disidentification merely renders Malaysian identity a fond memory.

Hence, this distance from Malaysia has led to a temporal re-configuration of their national identity — as queerness takes on a coherent presence

within this alternative space, one participant states:

My Malaysian identity is still- it's still present, it's still something that I'm proud of. And I bring up in conversations with my friends here. I tell them about certain things that Malaysian, mostly about food and like the dynamics of people, what it's like, but I do realize that it's sort of taken more of a backseat to the rest of my personality? But it has taken like a backseat. It's not- It's not like, I wouldn't call it my defining trait. I'm not sure if it ever was to be honest.

In this sense, Malaysianness is treated as a base identity inherent to my participants, whilst queerness was kept repressed within the homeland's locale. When asked whether he felt proud to be queer, one participant responded saying:

I guess geographically if I'm in London I will but not if I'm back in Malaysia... Moving away from that community that I've been so used to, that is so kind of trapping, I guess have made me feel more accepted.

While being in London is treated as a 'liberating' experience for him, Malaysia is depicted as a presence that limits, or 'traps,' their sense of progress. In line with Anzaldúa's (1987) definition of homophobia, almost all participants have indicated some kind of concern regarding 'going home,' and the implications this may have on their newfound connection to their queer identities. Since all of my participants were students, some have made reference to the anxiety that comes with having to "get that plane home over the summer", as one participant states:

But when I do come home for summer, though, I feel like my experience has changed a little bit ever since I came out as if I was harbouring some kind of dirty little secret.

The alternative space of London has constituted queerness as a new present and potential future for my participants, ultimately providing them with a sense of progress — but when forced to return home, the feeling of progression that came with this newfound queer presence is necessarily regressed and stagnated. In a way, travelling back to the postcolonial homeland from the colonial metropole is to travel backwards in time.

As such, the national spaces of Malaysia and London are depicted in most accounts as existing within different temporalities, leading to the deferral of queerness and the rendering of Malaysia as a distant memory. As one participant puts it:

Not gonna lie, I dislike being Malaysian now...cuz, I feel like it has a lot to do with how repressive Malaysia is like and it's very disheartening...and I just don't see LGBTQ sentiment moving forward, at all. Maybe it would move forward but it's at a very slow pace.

Malaysia here is represented as lagging behind the present, unlike London, understood in most participant accounts as existing within the boundaries of modernity, defined along the lines of queer rights and visibility, which I will discuss later. This has inevitably resulted in the constitution of Malaysia's national space as being temporally fixed and incompatible with [Western] modernity, wherein any potential for change is perceived to be out of reach; it is not surprising then that my participants' queerness become necessarily deferred when any sense of progression feels stagnant within the homeland. Here, I re-visit Massey's argument that our linear concept of time is a Eurocentric one that posits the colonial metropole as a template for such progress: it becomes exceedingly clear that the spatio-temporal configurations of queerness and Malaysianness does not occur within a social vacuum, but are rather situated within particular assemblages and power relations that constitute London, and the UK more generally, as being temporally advanced and therefore more capable of accommodating queerness.

## 5.2 NEW [HOMO]NATIONAL AFFILIATIONS

As Gloria Anzaldúa refers to homophobia as the “fear of going home” (1987: 20), it can be inferred that the queer migrant experiences apprehensions surrounding the perception of their sexuality [or Shadow Beast] by the native culture. Similar to the modes of orientalism Ahmed observes in her critique of gay imperialism, the West is positioned as being inherently more liberating contrasted against the repressive, Islamic, homeland of Malaysia: values such as tolerance and openness are thus conceptualised as being intrinsic to a Western liberal democracy like London, allowing for an implicit trust that safety and, by extension, freedom could be guaranteed, as one participant notes:

...one of the most noticeable things about being LGBT in Malaysia, is the fact that like, you don't really have anyone that you can openly and overtly trust from the get go. For example, like with my best friend, I had to like, test the waters slowly over time to see if he would be comfortable with gay people if I came out to him. I feel like anywhere else that's not- that's not an Islamic centric country,

with perhaps more Western values, it's really easy to find out. Because people are more... people talk about it more so you can very easily identify if someone is homophobic, if they're okay with it. But in Malaysia, it's just a bit more like please don't talk about it, if we don't know until you like find ways to probe and find out

Likewise, anti-discrimination policies and the levels of queer representation made available in London has also fed into this new sense of national belonging amongst my participants. Since the ability to be 'out' and queer in public is rendered a possibility, one other participant comments:

And so being exposed to this environment and living in this country where, you know, in fact, it's openly celebrated as a part of a diversity scheme, where people actually want to have more people of various backgrounds within their companies, and their societies, and communities, LGBT and so on and so forth, it's very hard to go back to a repressive country so basically, I think living here has made me more proud of who I am... made me more comfortable to be myself and made me want to actually not want to hide anymore, like not only like personally but professionally as well within my members of my community so obviously if I have to go back I have to do that right because we're not there yet.

Yet, these same participants also reported having had experienced some degree of homophobic discrimination as a result of being 'out' in public:

I've only experienced, I have experienced one case of homophobia here. But that was because I was, because I felt comfortable enough to even be like holding hands with a guy in public compared to in Malaysia, I would never ever, ever do that.

As Martin Manalansan (1995) argues, publicity does not necessarily carry the same significance for non-Western queers and may even be an arena of shame and degradation for them, particularly along lines of race, class and migrant status. Whilst there is a liberal assertion that visibility works to demystify queerness, it simultaneously fosters an environment for state actors to perpetuate stigmatisation and discrimination, affecting different kinds of queer subjects in asymmetrical ways (EDENBORG 2020). Despite this, the possibility to come out and be queer in public was desirable for my participants in part due to London's characterisation as a 'queer-friendly' space and the rendering of sexual expression as a hegemonic value of Western modernity. To invoke Jason Ritchie's (2010) criticisms of the mainstream coming out narrative, visibility in these instances is more concerned

with making a claim for equal citizenship as opposed to challenging the anti-queer apparatus of the neoliberal state. As such, while the race and migrant statuses of my participants may interrupt their calls for national belonging, the possibility of queerness in the alternative national space of London juxtaposed against a repressive Malaysia renders progress available. Similar to Sältenberg's (2016) findings in her study of queer migrants in Sweden, prioritising queerness over the racial part of the migrant identity might just be strategic when it comes to accessing modes of queer citizenship contoured by homonationalism.

Hence, my participants expressed an implicit affiliation towards London, and the UK more generally, due to the underlying assumption that queerness is more compatible with Western nationalities over others because of the way homonationalism subsumes queer identities under the umbrella of nationalised identities in most European / Western nation-states (WHITE 2013; SÄLTENBERG 2016). Their idea of what it means to progress is often articulated within the rubric of a Western queer politics emphasising rights and visibility, typically in terms of legality and representation, as was mentioned by the following participant:

And so being exposed to this environment and living in this country where, you know, in fact, it's openly celebrated as a part of a diversity scheme, where people actually want to have more people of various backgrounds within their companies, and their societies, and communities, LGBT and so on and so forth, it's very hard to go back to a repressive country so basically, I think living here has made me more proud of who I am...

It is here that I bring in Rahul Rao's (2020) concept of homocapitalism, which draws on the logic of neoliberalism to constitute the prospect of a rosy future predicated on the potential growth productivity that should occur if a state were to embrace LGBT rights. Working together with homonationalism's orientalist persuasions, they constitute London as a space of modernity and a futurity made desirable by the hegemony of a global queer liberalism and Western queer paradigm. It is inevitable then, that to reach the horizon of queerness, the idealisation and imitation of a such a paradigm is seen as necessary; queer futurity and social acceptance thus become defined by the values of Western liberal democracy.

As previously mentioned, the underlying assemblages of homonationalism has made it so that [non-Western] queer migrants must shed their

national [read: racial] identities and fixate on their queerness in order to fit into the hegemonic Western values of modernity and achieve the horizons they so desire. Hence, new [homo]national affiliations become forged as a result of the global imaginaries and hierarchies that have constituted the national spaces of the West, and the queer ways of being it seeks to assimilate into its hegemonic field, a site of progress. According to Manalansan's observations regarding the narratives of gay rights, it is not surprising that my participants have internalised a queer Western politics that equates rights and visibility as a road towards a queer horizon, contradicting Muñoz's original postulations as such ideals are predicated on a politics of assimilation. The entrenchment of hegemonic neoliberal values of sexual freedom and gay rights have inevitably obscured the many possible queer ways of being that sit outside the rubric of a Western queer paradigm, and as such, the horizons that my participants desire become defined along these very lines.

#### CONCLUSION: NEW HOMONATIONALISMS AND THE SPECTRES OF A MALAYSIAN PAST

Invoking Carla Freccero's (2005) conceptualisation of queer spectrality, the figures of loss and otherness experienced in the homeland haunt my participants as they collectively desire and long for a future that allows them access to a queer possibility missing from their past. Within my participants' narratives, a tension between queerness and nationality ensues. A sense of progression was made available through the incorporation of queer identities as part of Western nationalisms while the repression of these identities take place within Malaysia's national space, resulting in their inevitable deferral. To re-iterate Massey (2005), identity, time, and space all sit in relation to one another and are open to continuous change, which Stuart Hall (1999) also describes in his account of Caribbean diasporic identity; temporalised processes of change were configured alongside displacement and movement, and such was the case with this study. When a particular national space has been socially, politically, and legally configured as being 'queer-friendly' and therefore oriented towards modernity, the non-Western parts of identity become necessarily suppressed to make room for queer identities subsumed and made congruent with Western, liberal values (SHAKSARI 2014; SÄLTENBERG 2016). For this reason I posit that by migrating from the postcolony



towards the colonial metropole, Malaysian and queer identity undergoes a spatio-temporal re-configuration wherein the possibility of queerness within an alternative space like London renders a new present and potential future available whilst Malaysianness is constituted as a spectre from a repressive past. Therefore, the queer migrant travels through time as they move away from the postcolonial homeland and towards the metropolitan West, entering the space of modernity and futurity, so long as they obey the racial orders of a homonationalist vision of queer citizenship and belonging.

Thus, we should perhaps be more critical of Western ‘gay rights’ narratives and the political work they do to orientalise other nations and cultures who do not fit into Eurocentric models of modernity and futurity. This is not to say that sexual or gender diversity is a Western invention that should be rejected, but rather something the West has appropriated and weaponised to maintain its superiority in a hierarchy of nations, marginalising other non- normative queer ways of being in the process. Western modes of queerness become universalised and accepted as a model by which progress is measured for non-Western queers. Hence, I suggest we look to Gayatri Gopinath’s concept of a queer regional imaginary to resist the privileged status that visibility and nationality have in mainstream queer analyses where she implores us to “veer away from developmental and assimilationist narratives of both gay and national formation” (2018: 26) to instead focus on what has been rendered marginal and invisible by normative and nationalist girds of queer progress. Re-iterating what Muñoz had originally intended in his formations of queer utopian hermeneutics, to think of queerness as horizon and ‘not yet here’ is knowing that our freedom is impossible within a present that is confined by neoliberal thought, heteronormative time and gay assimilationist politics.

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