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Decolonising the Rainbow Flag

By Pia Laskar, Anna Johansson & Diana Mulinari

Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the location and the meaning given to the rainbow flag in places outside the hegemonic centre. Through three case studies in the global North and South, held together by a multi-ethnographic approach, as well as a certain theoretical tension between the rainbow flag as a boundary object and/or a floating signifier, we seek to study where the flag belongs, to whom it belongs, with particular focus on how. The three case studies, which are situated in a city in the Global South (Buenos Aires), in a conflict war zone in the Middle East (the West Bank) and in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden), share despite their diversity a peripheral location to hegemonic forms of knowledge production regimes. Central to our analysis is how the rainbow flag is given a multitude of original and radical different meanings that may challenge the colonial/Eurocentric notions which up to a certain extent are embedded in the rainbow flag.

Keywords: rainbow flags, multi-ethnographic approach, homonationalism, decolonial practices, communities of belonging.

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Introduction

The rainbow flag was gaining ground, challenging local flags and older symbols in Europe via Pride festivals during the 1990s, and has eventually developed into a symbol that seems to bring people historically excluded together in imagined transnational communities of belonging (Klapeer & Laskar, forthcoming). The flag is today used in the global North and South – and appears as a challenge to oppressive heteronormative gender and sexual norms, and as a symbol for sexual possibilities, freedom and rights. Contrariwise, critical voices within the queer globalised community have challenged the European universalising gaze (Wallerstein 2006) central to the subtext of the rainbow flag and its connotations with Western Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual and Queer (LGBTIQ) understandings of rights and obligations. Furthermore, as neither the West nor the Western queer communities are monoliths, the connotation of the rainbow flag differs also within these localities.

In the following we will sometimes use *queer/s* as an umbrella term to describe the concrete material, political, social, cultural position of people who are and have often been perceived as sexual deviants or as non-normative in terms of gender. When we use the term LGBTIQ or GLTTTBI,[1] it is related to a specific historical and political context or movement that uses the social categories of – and/or identifications with – these acronyms or versions of them. As we are taking our point of departure in critical queer theory, we also engage with *queer* as a verb (to *queer*, *queering*) which points to our intention to deconstruct, destroy, question, destabilise, and displace certain norms related to sexuality and gender from a critical theoretical perspective (Warner 1993).

Contemporary scholars would contend that flags function as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989), and that boundary objects facilitate interactions, translations, and coherence, but also stir conflicts over meaning across diverse social worlds. Flags as boundary objects are never fixed, they are multifocal and multivalent.

The rainbow flag, both scholars and activists argue, shadows the diversity of queer subjectivities that are always already mediated and affected by social position, race, access to economical means, geopolitical localisation, gender, age, etc. .Moreover, the rainbow flag plays a central role in boundary-making between the construction of Europeanness coded as progressive and its others, defined by their supposed lack of tolerance towards sexual minorities, inscribing the flag within colonial and racist discourses. Finally, the rainbow flag, other critical voices argue, is used as a fundamental symbol for marketing cities, and branding strategies in a context where sexual and cultural diversity is instrumentalised as an index of a city's financial success (Brenner et al 2012).

The aim of the article is to explore the location and the meaning given to the

rainbow flag in three peripheries. While the postcolonial and the decolonial fields take a point of departure in different traditions, for the purpose of this article, we focus on their shared epistemological frame, particularly in their shared understanding of the relationship between colonialism and power (Bhambra 2014). Through a decolonial reading of the flag, we attempt to make visible some of the diversity and complexity of the connotations of the rainbow flag which are produced in places outside the hegemonic centre. Theoretically, we take our point of departure in decolonial thinking: the focus lies on the complex, diverse and contradictory ways through which the flag is acted upon in spaces outside the hegemonic centre. The aim of the article is to highlight connotations that have been made invisible or marginalised in the dominant Western discourse/s. We want to identify where the flag is represented as belonging to a specific community, who may embody this belonging, with a particular focus on how. The article takes its point of departure from queer- inspired postcolonial and decolonial scholars and activists.

Methodologically we have been inspired by a multi-sited ethnographical approach (Marcus 1995), following people, ideas, conflicts, movements, and in this case, a cultural product. This approach allows us to treat our research object – the rainbow flag – as fluid and contiguous, and to follow it as it travels in different contexts, creating new connections, relationships and meanings. Moreover, we have been guided by the suggestion made by Nadai and Maeder (2005: 3) that the "fuzziness" of fields, that is fields with no clear boundaries, can be counteracted by a "theoretical clarification of the object of study… such a theoretical framework can then serve as a compass for research". Thus, the connections between the sites in this study are made through our theoretical framework.

The article consists of three case studies, each one of them researched and written separately by the three different authors. The case studies differ in several ways. First, in the methods used to collect the empirical material (participant observation, social media, secondary material, etc.); second, in the space emphasised in the analysis (bodies, frontier/walls, municipal nexus); third, in how the rainbow flag is inscribed as a symbol and how the 'doing' of the flag shapes and regulates communities of belonging.

However, the three case studies share a similar location within the global relations of power identified by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall as "The West and the Rest" (1992): the three of them can be conceptualised as belonging to "the Rest", i.e. peripheries to hegemonic forms of knowledge-truth production regimes. One of them is in a global city in the Global South (Buenos Aires); another in a conflict war zone in the Middle East (the West Bank) and the third in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden). In the analysis they also share a specific event through which the rainbow flag's meanings are explored. To grasp

the complexity of meanings and stories produced by "the Rest" we use multiple entries and perspectives, enabling us to demonstrate various usages and interpretations outside the hegemonic centre.

As Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2007) respective Richard Jenkins (2007) note, even though the political and symbolic significance of flags is acknowledged in social science studies of nationalism, flags and their ubiquity and emotional power are seldom treated in a systematic way. In a similar way, we note that while the rainbow flag has been highlighted in its role of creating queer spaces (Merabet 2014), empirical investigations with the rainbow flag in focus are still rare. Through the decolonial reading of the role and significance of the rainbow flag in three different contexts, we hope to contribute to such a body of work by asking what discourses of colonialism and racialisation processes are deployed and what forms and strategies of resistance are put into play by the rainbow flag.

What is a Flag?

The flag (or rather the everyday presence of the flag) in Western societies embodies forms of what sociologist Michael Billig (1995) names as banal nationalism: The nation, the author asserts, is indicated or "flagged" in the daily lives of citizens. Feminist scholars (Hyndman 2003) have identified how the (national) flag is often connected to an affective economy of patriotism that regulates gender and sexuality regimes through the construction of men as soldiers and protectors of the nation and women as mothers central to biological and cultural reproduction. National flags, gender scholars argue, evoke not only forms of belonging that create boundaries between those that officially belong to the nation and those that are excluded from this community, but also evoke forms of togetherness that deny the fundamental social conflicts within nations as both imagined and fractured communities. Feminist scholars have introduced the notion of politics of belonging to grasp what Adrian Favell (1999) defined as "the dirty work of boundary maintenance". For Yuval Davis (2006), the politics of belonging is both about the boundary-making that creates and reproduces communities but also the struggle around the meaning of what and who is involved in belonging.

Located within this critical theory tradition, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe speak in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* about the floating signifiers that can be discursively constructed within a political field because as such they are not articulated to a discourse chain (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 113). For Laclau, the floating signifier is the signifier which "results from the unfixity introduced by the plurality of discourse" (Butler et al 2000: 305). The flag could be read as a floating signifier, a boundary object that links communities of belonging together and is plastic enough towards different meanings and interpretations.

The Fluid Meanings of the Rainbow Flag: Swedish Residentalism in a Small Town.

In 2009, Tage Gripenstam, a local councillor from the Centre Party in Södertälje (a town of some 100.000 inhabitants about 50 km from the capital Stockholm), introduced a bill to the municipal council to enable the hoisting of rainbow flags on the municipal official flagpoles during Pride festivals (Sandin 2009). The local councillor was concerned with the vulnerability of LGBT[2] people in town – if open about their sexual identities; they were neither safe nor secure. To hoist the rainbow flag on official flagpoles should therefore be an important symbolic act showing that the municipality stood openly behind the rights of all LGBT individuals. In the eyes of this local councillor, the rainbow flag symbolised diversity and had a different width and relevance than other (political) flags. (Hoisting political flags should be avoided according to Swedish municipalities' flag regulations.) Even though the bill was rejected, the rainbow flag would continue to be a contested object. During the years to come, the local councillor would be interviewed in the media when anything occurred related to rainbow flags or Pride events in Södertälje. In an interview in Swedish public television 2015, Gripenstam identified the fact that residents in Södertälje had different cultural backgrounds and values as one of the factors as to why one might be vulnerable as a LGBT person. Many newcomers arrive from areas where LGBTQ persons are not accepted and obviously some of them make it difficult for others to be open, according to Gripenstam (Klintbo Skilje 2015).

To understand the implications of this comment, it is important to bear in mind that Södertälje has since long had the largest population of Syrian and Assyrian migrants per capita in Sweden: 25-30,000 out of 100,000 inhabitants 2014 (Mack 2014:156), and that the Syrian and Assyrian communities is highly visible in the municipality.[3] In 2014, Södertälje had five Syrian and Assyrian Orthodox churches, a TV channel that broadcasted in Neo-Aramaic, Arabic and English to eighty countries, and two professional football teams (one Syrian and one Assyrian). Strains between the ethnic Swedish majority population and the Syrian and Assyrian communities are not uncommon.[4]

The two largest Pride festivals in Sweden present their aims as supporting an open and tolerant society, and working against prejudice and discrimination (West Pride Gothenburg 2016), and as working for liberation of the society from oppressive norms, for equality and LGBTIQ rights (Stockholm Pride 2016). In the following case, some of these values are connected with hoisting the rainbow flag and this acts role in the construction of what here will be called "Swedishness", coded as progressive and pro-diversity, and contrasted with its binary Otherness, defined by a closed society, intolerance, prejudice, inequality, discriminating and oppressive norms towards sexual minorities.

Drawing on white hegemony studies (Dyer 1997, Hughey 2010, Hübinette & Lundström 2014), the concept "Swedishness" will in this case be used to study seemingly disparate national identity formations and unpack their constitution and presumed hierarchies by references to the rainbow flag. The concept makes it possible to analyse if – and in that case how – reproductions of and appeals to essentialist cultural distinctions operate in constructions of a binary Other in the online space for reader's comments in *Länstidningen*, the local newspaper of Södertälje.

Relocating the rainbow flag

In 2013, four years after the above-mentioned local councillor's bill, people from Club Molto, an assemblage of self-identified LGBTIQ people in Södertälje, one night hoisted the rainbow flag at one of the municipality's flagpoles, outside the municipal council building. Club Molto's direct action fuelled the debate on hoisting rainbow flags further, in particular in the social media, but also in the local daily paper where Club Molto published an article explaining their action.

> We hoisted it also to show that we stand up for the human rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. But above all, we did it to highlight our support for the residents in Södertälje who identify as lesbians, gays, transpersons or queer, but don't dare call themselves that because of fear for their lives or of being excluded from society. (Molto 2013)

In the year after Club Molto's civil obedience, a sufficient number of municipal politicians from different political parties formed a representative majority united around the suggestion to allow for flags of assorted organisations/societies to be hoisted on the municipality's flagpoles, at special events and under certain conditions: "If the event takes place in Södertälje and if it is deemed to be of importance for the municipality and represents the municipality's policies and values" (quoted from Leitner 2014). The Pride rainbow flag was regarded as a flag of an organisation/society. The discussion in the municipal council also led the politicians to put extra focus on LGBTIQ vulnerability, by guaranteeing a sum of money to be used to help inform the public about queer issues, since the symbolic value of flagging was not viewed as sufficient enough to combat local prejudices (Holgersson 2014). However, when different journalists in the local media covered the new flag policy, they also provoked numerous readers' responses. The online responses were published in the commentators' space directly following the articles in question. The space was public and anonymous comments were accepted.[5] Two main arguments can be detected in the comments to the article. One pertains to exclusion and inclusion of minority groups in general: why only hoisting the flag for the

LGBT category? It excludes and discriminates against other categories in Sweden (mentioned were Sámi and Roma people, retirees, children, heterosexual people, and the disabled). It was argued that the municipality should be neutral and not support only one group.

The other thread was introduced by a suggestion that the Syrian flag should be hoisted instead of celebrating the rainbow flag, in memory of Seyfo/Sayfo – the genocide of Assyrians by and in the Ottoman Empire (1914-1920). One commentator answered stressing that neither Pride nor Sayfo should be the focus of a flag: "We live in Sweden. Accept that!" Yet another commentator in this thread wrote: "Syrians can also hoist the rainbow flag. It encompasses more than Pride [for LGBTIQ people]. Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody's rights". Another commentator stressed "Swedish values" without contrasting this against minorities: "To hoist the rainbow flag is in line with the open society we [Södertälje] try to obtain. To hoist the flag signals support for a community that has been excluded and exposed for many years". Against the backdrop described above regarding the tensions between the Syrian community and the Swedish ethnic majority population, it is not difficult to interpret the comments following the suggestion to remember Seyfo/Sayfo, such as "We live in Sweden. Accept that", and "Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody's rights", as addressing the Syrian Assyrian Others.[6] The tensions between Syrians and other immigrants, as well as with the majority population in Södertälje, have been described by Andersson (2009) and Mack (2014), but clearly more research is needed.

Certainly Club Molto and perhaps other self-identified queers in Södertälje felt empowered by the municipality's decision to hoist the rainbow flag. However, they did not participate with comments online in the debates in the newspapers. That arena quickly filled up with other agents. Some of them regarded the rainbow flag as a symbol for what can be described as hegemonic Swedish values, such as the respect for everybody's rights, an open society, support for vulnerable LGBTIQ-people, etc. – but hoisting the flag was also regarded as an act of excluding other groups from the municipality's sphere of concern. Furthermore, several commentators in the debate juxtaposed so-called Swedish values against values of the Others, thereby suggesting that the Others took a stand against equal rights, everybody's equal values, and an open society, etc., while Swedishness implicitly stood to represent the opposite, which corresponds to previous research (Hübinette & Lundström 2014).

The rainbow flag as a symbol for inclusion and exclusion

The first comment referred to above demands neutrality by arguing that by supporting one vulnerable category, the municipality is excluding other discriminated categories such as Roma people, retirees, children, heterosexual people, and

the disabled. Since the municipality had decided to open up its space for the hoisting of flags to a range of assorted unions and organisations, this argument kicked in, so to speak, an already open door. It can be added that the commentator focuses on categories that are protected against discrimination according to Swedish law (*Diskrimineringslagen*), i.e. ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability. This commentator leaves out the other three categories protected by the law: gender, gender expression and religious beliefs.

The argument in behalf of commemorating the genocide of Assyrians is yet another critique of the municipality's choosing to focus on just one vulnerable group. In this commentary, however, there is no appeal to include more categories than that reflected by the Syrian flag – which of course could encompass people of different ages, ethnicities, religious beliefs, sexualities, gender, gender expression and abilities. The comment by one reader that neither the rainbow flag nor the Syrian flag should be hoisted adds: "We live in Sweden. Accept that!" This implicitly rules out diversity and the possibility to encompass a diverse multitude by juxtaposing two national belongings as totally different and sets them against each other. The message seems to be: assimilate or leave.

When writing that Syrians also can hoist the rainbow flag as it encompasses more than Pride (for LGBTQI-persons), the next commentator sees the flag as a symbol for an expanded compass of diversity. However, it is still the "Syrians" who should honour the rainbow flag and not the other way around. The latter would mean that the flag which includes "more than Pride" would also embrace "Syrians" and their memories of genocide. However, by adding "Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody's rights", the comment seems to turn the flag away from the Assyrian Syrian memory of genocide.

Another commentator promoted values to strive for without setting vulnerable groups against each other: "To hoist the rainbow flag is in line with the open society we [Södertälje] try to achieve. To hoist the flag signals support for a community that has been excluded and vulnerable for many years". However, the comment does not invite the Syrian community (as an excluded and vulnerable category) to be included in this support. On the contrary, it seems to join the chorus setting two vulnerable groups against each other – instead of indeed promoting the openness, tolerance, equality, etc. towards the Others that Swedishness appears to stand for.

Using Swedishness in the making of the monolithic Other

In the interviews with local councillor Tage Gripenstam and in these few examples of comments in online spaces attached to journalists' articles, so-called Swedish values contrasted with values of the Others in the name of the rainbow flag, tending to suggest that the Others opposed equal rights, people's equal values, and an

open society. Concurrently, the category of the Others was constructed as a grey monolith bereft of the colours of what the rainbow flag, according to some of the protagonists, would seem to symbolise and include – an open society, tolerance, equality, and acting to struggle against discriminatory and oppressive norms towards sexual minorities. However, in the shadow of the values inscribed in the rainbow flag in this case, Swedishness emerges simultaneously with the intolerant construction of the binary Syrian Assyrian Other. Swedishness in this case thus occurs via the use of the rainbow flag as a signifier for diversity, and those marked as representatives of it are strongly positioned as different and superior to those marked as "the Others".

What is at stake in space of commentators' views as examined in this study is far removed from the self-identified queer people of Club Molto and their wish for acceptance of certain sexually-labelled groups of individuals. Instead the rainbow flagging for LGBTIQ people in Södertälje triggered a debate among commentators that became sites for the construction of a homophobic, essentially monolithic Other, and an imagined Swedish community of belonging. The rainbow flag as a floating signifier was hence in use discursively in defining as well as inscribing Swedishness. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the municipality's flagging policies as well as a tolerance of the rainbow flag undergoes a process of being incorporated into national imaginaries, framed in binaries such as openness/closeness, and respect for rights/disrespect – i.e. processes that Jasbir Puar (2007) has termed homonationalism.

By contrast, incidents occurred in Södertälje during Pride 2016, when the municipality's rainbow flags were stolen from their flagpoles and then burned. At first, extreme right winged media eyes were directed towards the Other (Fria Tider 2016), however, the action was filmed and placed on youtube, claimed by Kampgrupp 103, and proudly presented by the right-wing extremist organisation Nordiska motståndsrörelsen – a part of the Swedish white power Nazi milieu (Nordfront 2016; Daham 2016). Within the analytical frame in use in this case study, the right-wing extremists can be described as marginalised representatives of Swedishness, failing to achieve the dominant ideals connoted by the rainbow flag.

Thus, this first case study confirms international scholarship on homonationalism and Swedishness, by utilising new data identifying the role the rainbow flag may play to produce and reinforce a Eurocentric understanding of gender and sexuality. The following case study shares a similar focus on the role of the flag as a code for Western (European) modernity. However, it provides a different perspective in departing from the ways through which the rainbow flag is transformed into an art object, or rather in how the flag enters the field of art (and politics).

"Through the Spectrum" – the Rainbow flag as a Symbol of Freedom from Occupation

On 29 June 2015, the Palestinian visual artist Khaled Jarrar painted a section of Israel´s separation wall (or as the Palestinians call it, "The Apartheid Wall") – the 425-mile-long West Bank barrier, separating Israel from the Palestinian territories – with the colours of the rainbow flag. He called the mural "Through the Spectrum". Four hours later the mural was painted over with white paint by some people, self-identified as part of the Palestinian community on the West Bank (Vartanian 2015; *The Guardian* 2015). This incident immediately stirred a debate in the Palestinian community, in the Jewish-Israeli and pro-Israeli community as well as internationally, where issues of LGBTIQ rights and visibility in Palestine, the Israeli occupation and politics of 'pinkwashing' were under discursive focus. This analysis explores significances of the rainbow flag as interpreted by different actors within the Israeli/Palestinian context, focusing in the main on how Jarrar´s work was interpreted and used by the international/Israeli press.

The representation of a homophobic Palestine versus a gay-friendly Israel

The day after the incident, a central news piece on it was published by Associated Press and later circulated in various publications and media, such as *The Guardian* and Israeli daily *Haaretz* (Associated Press 2015a; Associated Press 2015b; Daraghmeh & Deitch 2015). Voices of several Palestinians who condemned the mural and who had been part of its whitewashing are presented: "Muhammad, who only gave his first name for fear of repercussions, said he helped whitewash the flag because 'we cannot promote gay rights'". The text continues:

> Gay Palestinians tend to be secretive about their social lives and some have crossed into Israel to live safely. (…) Israel, meanwhile, has emerged as one of the world's most gay-friendly travel destinations, in sharp contrast to the rest of the Middle East where gay people are often persecuted and even killed. (Associated Press 2015a; Associated Press 2015b).

Further, Jarrar was cited in *Haaretz* as stating that the whitewashing "reflects the absence of tolerance, and freedoms in the Palestinian society" (Daraghmeh & Deitch 2015).

The texts all painted a picture of a homophobic and backward Palestine juxtaposed to a gay-friendly and modern Israel. Key words used to describe lives for gays in Palestine are "secretive", while gay lives in Israel are linked to "safety". The rainbow flag (as well as the suffering Palestinian queer) is in this context being mobilised to create divisions and boundaries between Palestine as associated with

repressive practices in "the Middle East" and Israel as free, tolerant and Western, and incorporated into the assemblage of Israeli homonationalism (Puar 2007; Carson 2013).

Freedom versus occupation

Later, a couple of days after the mural was painted and whitewashed, on 2 July 2015, Jarrar wrote a piece in the *Electric Intifada*, explaining his work "in his own words (Jarrar 2015). He stresses that he feels his intentions have been "hijacked and manipulated" by the international press, for example, being misquoted as speaking of "absence of tolerance, and freedoms in the Palestinian society". According to Jarrar "Through the Spectrum" is being used in the Israeli 'pinkwashing', that is, as a means of defending the Israeli state against potential criticism of its treatment of Palestinians (Puar & Mikdashi 2012). In fact, the work came about as he followed the news about the Supreme Court decision to legalise same-sex marriage in the US and millions of people all over the world used the "celebrate pride" filter provided by Facebook. He then came to think of the use of the rainbow "as a symbol of freedom and equality and what it could represent for other oppressed groups". To his mind, the rainbow colours are the "freedom colors" and the mural was painted as an expression of support for the freedom of the occupied Palestinian people: "I wanted the world to see that our struggle still exists and I felt there could be no better place to have that dialogue than on the concrete slabs of the most visible icon of our oppression". And he continues: "My goal is to send out a message to the whole world, which is still celebrating freedom, about the oppressed people living under military occupation (…)" (Vartanian 2015).

Freedom is juxtaposed to the oppression of the Palestinians under Israel´s military occupation. Jarrar mobilises the flag through his art in the struggle for Palestinian nationhood and associates it with freedom from occupation. In a later interview by Al Monitor, Jarrar goes on to more explicitly link the struggle for queer rights and the struggle against the occupation, and defines the US refusal to "do justice to the Palestinian cause" at the same time as they "make a decision allowing gay marriage" as a "double standard on rights and freedoms" (Al-Ghoul 2015).

Unity and peace vs. anti-Semitism and hatred

As Jarrar explicitly explains that his intention is to expand the rainbow flag to include other freedoms and rights than that of sexuality, he is condemned and even accused of using the flag for spreading hatred and anti-Semitism. Esman (2015), a blogger at Blouin Artinfo, an international site covering news, expert commentary and debate on art and artists writes: "It takes a unique combination of chutzpah and talent to turn the universal symbol of unity and peace into a message of

anti-Semitism and hatred". The "chutzpah" (which means 'audacity', and is used indignantly in Hebrew to describe someone who has overstepped the boundaries of accepted behaviour), is in this context to use the rainbow flag to link the struggle for gay rights with the struggle by the Palestinian community against Israeli racism and occupational power. As pointed out by Ritchie (2014), it is fundamental to Israeli state formation that these struggles and issues are viewed and treated as separate, and that Israeli queers only are included into the nation as long as they do not demand transformation of the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and as long as they participate in the demonisation of the Palestinian Other.

The argument against Jarrar could be seen as an example of how accusations of anti-Semitism has become a "potent tool" in the dominant discourses on Israeli and Palestinian conflict to silence opposition and delegitimise criticism of Israel (Hallward 2013) – and as part of the strategy of pink-washing. In order to convincingly define the mural in terms of "anti-Semitism and hatred", the first step for the writer is to contest the interpretation of the rainbow flag as a symbol of "freedom", and instead reinterpret it as a symbol of "unity and peace". The next is to discredit Jarrar on basis of his Palestinian-ness and resistance against the Occupation: "But perhaps that's to be expected when a Palestinian artist paints the rainbow on the West Bank Security Wall just as the rest of the (Western) world celebrates the US Supreme Court decision to allow lesbians and gays to marry" (Esman 2015). In this citation Jarrar and the Palestinian cause are excluded from the "unity and peace" of the "Western community" celebrating gay rights. The use of the flag as symbolising freedom from oppression is juxtaposed to the "unity and peace" of the liberal, Western world, in which the Palestinians are positioned as the "Other". Thus, this argument applies the same logic as in the previous case, in which Swedishness is constructed as more tolerant to what is marked as values of Syrian/Assyrian Other.

The decolonising of the Palestinian queer

The situation of and debate concerning "Through the Spectrum" serves as a case of how the rainbow flag as a floating signifier is continuously interpreted and reinterpreted, mobilised and used within the specific context of the Israeli/Palestine conflict. As shown, the media coverage by Associated Press and *Haaretz* does not in any way reflect or acknowledge the broader and alternative significance Jarrar has given the rainbow flag in his work – as a symbol also for freedom from military occupation. Instead they use his work to reiterate the dichotomisation of the Primitive/Arab/the East and the Modern/Jew/the West, fundamental to the Israeli national narrative (Boger 2008), consequently reproducing the discursive silence regarding Palestine rights to nationhood and national rights (McMahon 2010). As Jarrar insists on challenging the colonial logic that Israeli homonationalism

(as well as the US counterpart) is built upon, linking together the struggle for gay rights with the struggle against Israeli occupation and for nationhood, he is accused of anti-Semitism and is demonised as the Palestinian Other.

In his work, Jarrar mobilises the rainbow flag for other purposes than promoting equal rights for LGBTQ people. Thus, the case of "Through the Spectrum" is an example of how the rainbow flag as a global symbol is appropriated not only by the hegemonic power (such as the Israeli state), but also by actors located outside the hegemonic centre. At the same time, the interpretation of the rainbow flag made by Jarrar could be understood as a contribution to "the decolonisation of the Palestinian queer" – an aim that has been articulated by the Palestinian organisation Al-Qaws – for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society – which focuses on sexual and gender oppressions rather than on LGBTIQ rights and homophobia (Alsaafin 2013). Hence, the rainbow flag as read from the particular location of occupied Palestine becomes a symbol for a queer community that is engaged in and part of a wider process of Palestinian decolonisation and liberation. By being painted on the Apartheid Wall as well as painted over, and becoming an object of a heated debate, the rainbow flag has also contributed to the construction of a particular Palestinian queer community, in creating boundaries as well as links between different groups.

As in the previous case, localised in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden) – in which the flag is seen as encompassing "more than Pride" and also would both embrace "Syrians" and their memories of genocide, and exclude them from Swedishness as intolerant "Others" – the rainbow flag in the context of Palestine encompasses not only LGBTIQ rights, but also the struggle against military occupation and for national independence and social justice.

The third case study provides continuity in the exploration of the role of the flag in locations outside the hegemonic Global North. However, it differs in exploring the meaning of the flag from the standpoint of GLTTTBI-identified communities of belonging.

Bodies, Politics and Belonging

Our flag, their places

Buenos Aires. Wednesday, 15 July 2010 (based on fieldwork notes). One of the authors is waiting together with thousands of others outside the Argentinean Congress in Buenos Aires for the parliamentary decision regarding the reform of the Civil Code towards the *matrimonio igualitario* (legalization of same-sex marriage).[7] The group that consists of members of feminists and GLTTTBI networks will not stay until the end of the legislative debate. It is very cold and half past midnight and the debates seem to go on and on. The researcher is hungry and ti-

red. She keeps proposing restaurants and bars and encounter the veto of two of the members of the group. Not here. No, Never. The researcher finds herself hoping that no rainbow flags are visible in any restaurants, because the activists' veto targets the main restaurants with rainbow flags. The group is walking through a privileged neighbourhood where the notion of Buenos Aires as a gay-friendly capital is acted upon through hostels, hotels, queer tango classes and other activities targeting tourists (Puar 2002). Why the avoidance of restaurants displaying the rainbow flag by these two lesbian-identified feminist activists who had been carrying impressively large rainbow flags for hours, who had cried and cried when the votes showed on the screen that "we" were winning and the law allowing same-sex couples to get married was about to be passed? After everybody has ordered the first beer Julia states:

> Not one of us could afford a glass of water in those places; places where *café con leche* (in Spanish) is called *café au lait*… I hate them... I really hate them. And stop laughing... Have you asked them to put a poster of one of our activities? They always say no. Not to speak about our comrades who work night shifts and wants to visit the bar… They want the flag but they do not want our bodies. The problem is not the flag; it is the place, the people. The problem is that we cannot defend our flag in this place with these people around. It is an issue of respect. If you respect the flag, you do not put it in a window together with the menu.

The more the fieldwork notes were analysed, remembering the situation with Julia arguing and the rest laughing at her (actually laughing at her long statement), the more the issue of place appears as central as to how the rainbow flag is given meaning – or rather how the rainbow flag is experienced as being under threat (Julia uses the notion of defense). Understanding the flag as a floating signifier illuminates the central role that places have in the creation and conflict over meaning, so radically so as those that have been standing for hours holding the rainbow flag as an expression of community and belonging now strongly endeavor to disidentify themselves from the same flag. Julia makes a clear connection between places, symbols and bodies claiming that those bodies that the flag names are expelled from these fancy queer-friendly restaurants. Her argument could also be understood as a struggle to define when and where and for whom the flag is connected with the visibility of bodies transgressing norms of gender and sexuality. Or rather when and where the flag functions as a boundary object creating collaboration and community over diversified experiences of exclusion and criminalisation. As Amaranta puts it: "These people cannot respect our flag, because they never in the first place understood that the flag protects us, like a shield". Her argument

could be read as suggesting that to respect the flag is to know where and why it should be celebrated, where and why the flag should be visible but maybe most central where and why the right of invisibility must be protected (Berkins 2009). Amaranta´s argument can also be understood as a struggle to define the role of the rainbow flag in when and where and for whom the visibility of queer bodies should be enacted. But her argument also illuminates the power and the centrality of the flag as a symbol for the community. A symbol that, according to both Julia and Amaranta, demands respect, and up to a certain extent, reverence.

Our bodies, our flag(s)

Buenos, Aires. 15 October 2015. Rainbow flags everywhere, to help more than 200 persons, family friends and activists who have gathered to mourn trans-activist Diana Sacayan murdered in her home.[8] Diana Sacayán identified herself as belonging to the *transa*, *sudaca* and *originaria*; naming her identities and belonging as a trans-activist, from the Global South and of indigenous background. She was a member of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association and led the Mal Antidiscrimination Liberation Movement in Argentina. She had participated in the struggles of the 1990s in the *piqueteros*[9] movement and worked very hard for the creation of quotas for trans-persons that are open for stable jobs in the formal labour market, outside prostitution, a kind of work she had experienced and particularly the exposition to the trans-phobic violence that that work entails. Diana also got headlines in 2012 when she was given her ID card with a female gender by Argentina´s first female president Cristina Kirchner. This is how Amalia, one of the friends/informants, describes the event:

> So there were a lot of flowers… (I put a jasmine for you) and her comrades had these broad rainbow flags that people that were carrying the coffin went through. And we all were shouting "Diana Sacayán, presente. Ahora y siempre" ('Diana Sacayan is Present. Now and Always') and then everybody began to cry. It was beautiful and everybody said, I also said, beautiful. But dearest I am so tired, we are so tired, you know very well how tired we are of beautiful burial rituals.

Queer studies have explored the meaning of burial rituals for a historically discriminated community, particularly regarding family ties and family belonging (Gould 2009; Baron 2011). In many senses, Diana´s burial showed very similar patterns regarding the centrality of her family of choice in the ritual. However, there are relevant differences, mirrored in how diverse flags name (and politicise) belonging. The first one is the presence of the Argentinean flag as a clear expression of the rights of trans-persons to be included not only through legal status as

citizens but also underlining their right to belong to the nation. Yet the national flag is not alone. The *whipala*[10] overlaps the Argentinean flag as a sign of Diana´s belonging to the Bolivian migrant community and of her identification with their struggles and with their dreams as indigenous peoples, migrants and racialised workers. While both the Argentinean and the whipala covered the coffin, the rainbow flag is not fixed, but carried by her best friends while others bear the coffin through the human bridge constructed by the flags.[11] This passing through the flag enacts community and belonging, a belonging that through the slogan Present Now and Always symbolically naming the disappeared during the military dictatorship (1976-1984),[12] as it does also with Sacayán's own poem connecting machos and fascists (the two groups she as a feminist would not want at her burial).

Our flags and their flags

These practices name desire and politicise sexuality, they are about the economies of bodies, how we are put together (by others) and how through the creation of boundary objects (like the rainbow flag) communities of belonging survive and resist. To locate these experiences as an effect of global queerness is to exclude the powerful role that the cultural traditions of several decades of Latin American leftist-inspired political struggles creatively reorganised and gave new meanings through the presence of the rainbow flag. The emergence of broad forms of collaboration between GLTTTBI and the human rights organisations took place, scholars and activists argue, through the shared experience of struggles against the military dictatorship during the eighties and against neoliberalism and resistance to police violence during the 1990s. In Argentina, sex- and gender-based political movements had long drawn attention to the link between the political economy of sexuality and the repressive practices of the state (Hiller 2010; Gutierrez 2011). In the words of Magdalena, a very experienced trans-activist:

> We are not *boludos de barrio Norte* (we are not stupid people from a neighbourhood coded as privileged) wagging a rainbow flag. Many of us fought our space together with the *piqueteros* throwing stones, occupying buildings. We got the support of the Mothers (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) when the police was killing us. We all starved to death in the 90s. We were, we are *travas* (transpersons), but most of all, we are *pueblo* (the people) … If you have a terrorist state that violates every other right…. Everybody here is very well-trained in reading double discourses. Rainbow flags are never enough.

Perhaps this broader understanding of alliance and social justice – situated to a certain extent in the working class/non-white background of many GLTTTBI

activists, their identification with broader communities of struggle – provides a radically different understanding of the rainbow flag in general and of gender and sexual rights in particular, other than the Western/European liberal-coded agenda. Maybe these collective experiences of struggling together with other social movements open up an ability to read power (what Magdalena calls double discourses) that both allows for an identification with the rainbow flag as a figure of community and belonging, and concomitantly a critical disapproval of the same flag when used in the name of neoliberalism and white privilege.

Towards a Decolonial Reading of the Rainbow Flag

While the struggle for citizenship for LGBTIQ people in some ways has gained ground globally, many of its reforms have occurred within an increasingly unequal society, one where commodification of sexuality (Hennessy, 2000) is at the core of the forms of incorporation of LGBTIQ rights. Lisa Duggan uses the concept of "homonormativity" (Duggan 2002: 179) to identify forms of inclusion through politics where LGBTIQ´s domesticity and consumption patterns reinforce heteronormative culture. Eurocentric and US located fantasies about sexual rights going global take a point of departure in Europe (and the West). This process of boundary-making takes place between urban and rural (Halberstam 2005); between majority and minoritised racialised groups in the Global North, and between the Global North and the Global South. Postcolonial-inspired queer scholars have analysed how images of European modernity are at the core of the construction and the instrumentalisation of sexual diversity in the context of global inequalities. A central contribution towards a postcolonial reading of queer theory is the work of Jasbir Puar (2007), which illuminates how homonormativity is always constructed in relation to national recognisable values – ones that can be contrasted with counter-images of the others. Puar convincingly shows how queer discourses are incorporated into the US post-9-11 ethos as a regulatory norm aiming at the racialisation of Muslims as terrorists, dangerous radical individuals belonging to repressive and patriarchal cultures.

These case studies illuminate how the rainbow flag plays a fundamental role in marking boundaries between those who belong to accepted and desirable communities and those who are excluded from them in all three contexts. While presumed homophobic people of Syrian or Assyrian descent in Sweden serve as legitimising figures for homonationalist Swedishness in the first case, the assumed homophobic Palestinians serve Israeli homonational purposes in the second case; finally, the presence of the rainbow flag in the context of globalised queer tourism excludes GLTTTBI local communities in Argentina

Postcolonial scholars provide different readings regarding the impact of a (qu-

eer) colonising Western gaze in the peripheries. Some argue that the universalising Western discourse through the concepts of "gay" and "lesbians" marginalises culturally coded practices of same sex activity; and can be inscribed within a missionary colonial tradition of "liberating" the Other from oppressive cultures and laws (Massad 2007). Other scholars suggest however that these lines of argumentation have serious shortcomings. On the one hand, there is a risk to be in a search of an authentic, pure, non-Western (sexual) culture. As Jarrod Hayes argues, one could make the case that homophobia has also been introduced by colonialism, even if conservative elites in the Third World that challenge LGBTIQ rights as a Western idea never mobilised against it (Hayes 2000). On the other, the binary opposition between Western and non-Western reinforces the (Eurocentric) notion of modernity as European modernity. One of the central contributions of both postcolonial and decolonial thought is their challenge to the parochial character of arguments based on the fantasy of the endogenous origins of European modernity. Fundamental cultural transformations are understood by this tradition. Haritaworn argues (Haritaworn et al. 2008) within a frame in which the Global South (the Other) responds or develops strategies due to the "impact" of modernity (see also Nichols 2012; Laskar 2014).

We are inspired and take our point of departure within a tradition of decolonial scholarship that shifts the focus from the Western (queer) colonial gaze towards emerging forms of (queer) resistance in the Global South. Grewal and Kaplan (2001) in their criticism towards binary oppositions between the local and the global, suggest that the Global South not only produces responses, but also creates selective, original and powerful readings of the potentialities and shortcomings of European modernity from their particular locations.

Central to this article has been to explore the location of the rainbow flag within the postcolonial/decolonial queer forms of resistance. The decolonial reading of the rainbow flag carried out in this work suggests that the flag as a symbol is far from fixed; rather, it is given a multitude of innovative and radical different meanings. Moreover, in the second and third case, it is obvious that rather than passively producing responses, the actors are creatively and collectively producing alternative definitions and politics from their specific locations and positionings – definitions that potentially challenge and destabilise the colonial/ Eurocentric notions embedded in the rainbow flag. In the first case, the rainbow flag is used to construct a homophobic Syrian Assyrian Other as a counter-image to homonationalistic Swedishness. Thus the flag is indeed a floating signifier whose meaning is decided by the signifier. The rainbow mural painted on the Apartheid Wall in Palestine contests the separation between issues of LGTBIQ rights and the military occupation of Palestine, which is fundamental to the national project of Israel. In both contexts of the Global South

(Palestine and Buenos Aires), the symbolic meaning of the rainbow flag is expanded beyond the individual/liberal sexual rights and freedoms focused on by Western LGBTIQ communities, encompassing the struggle against racism, class inequalities, military occupation, and for nationhood, indigenous rights, gender rights and trans-rights, while being engaged for and within an overall dedication to the struggle for social justice.

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Notes

[1] The acronym GLTTTBI refers to gay, lesbian, transvestite, transsexual, transgender, bisexual and intersex people. Mainstream media and public discourses in Argentina use it for the movement for diversity (el movimiento por la diversidad,) Brown 2002 and Berkins 2009.
[2] Gripenstam used the abbreviation HBT, which translates as LGBT in English.
[3] The term Syrian refers here to all people from the nation Syria, but also to persons who belong to the ethnic group defined by speaking Suryoyo, and/or belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church, or are transnational descendants from, or identify with these groups. The term Assyrians is commonly used to define Neo-Aramaic-speaking Orthodox- and other Christians of different groupings settled in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Lebanon (Mack 2014:156) and in Europe and North-America.

[4] On strains and racism in segregated Södertälje, see f.ex. Kakissis (2014); Jakobsson & Lagercrantz (2010); Länstidningen (2011); UR Skola (2009); Aftonbladet (2005).
[5] On the significance and validity of online comments on articles in newspapers, see for example Bergström (2008); Reich (2011); Schultz (2000).
[6] Commentaries on how Syrians in Södertälje are highly visible in the public sphere instead of accepting that they live in Sweden (i.e. assimilate) are in line with comments by interviewees in earlier research on how urban design changes from the bottom up (Mack 2014).
[7] The legalisation of same-sex marriage´in 2010 was followed by the gender identity law (2013) and made Argentina the first country in Latin America to legally recognise sexual citizenship rights.
[8] The Argentine Homosexual Community counted 14 hate-crime murders in 2014.
[9] The piquetero movement was organised during the 1990s by unemployed workers that blocked central streets in the city demanding their rights. More than 70 percent of the piqueteros and many of its leaders were women.
[10] The *whipala* with its rainbow form of mosaic has evolved as a symbol of the indigenous and anticolonial struggle for the Aymara people in Bolivia and is today recognised as the country's national symbol by the 2008 Constitution. See Pixten et al (2014); See also the debate on indigenous cultural objects https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/files/varldskultur/vkm-forskningsamlingar/e21bc935b861 (retreived 15 September 2016).
[11] http://www.telediariodigital.net/2015/10/adios-a-diana-sacayan-ella-dejo-un-legado-hay-que-continuar-su-lucha/ (retreived 15 September 2016).
[12] From 1976 to 1983, some 30,000 Argentinians were "disappeared" by the governing junta, many tortured and killed in a network of secret prisons, and untold others thrown out of airplanes during infamous death flights where members of the FHS (Homosexual Front for Socialism) were assassinated (Perlongher 1985).

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