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The Rainbow Flag as Friction:
Transnational, Imagined Communities of Belonging among Pakistani LGBTQ Activists

By Erika Alm & Lena Martinsson

Abstract

This article analyzes the frictions the rainbow flag creates between transnational, national and translocal discourses and materialities. It focuses on the ambivalent role that the transnational 'rainbow' space plays for community building for LGBTQ activists in in Pakistan. The rainbow flag can function as a way to mobilize an imagined transnational community of belonging, enabling people to politicize their experiences of discrimination as a demand of recognition directed at the state. But it can also enable homonationalism and transnational middle class formations that exclude groups of people, for example illiterates and people perceived of as traditional, such as Khwaja Siras. The article is based on auto-ethnographic reflections on encounters with activists in Pakistan, and critically discusses the problem of feeling 'too comfortable', as white, Western, middle-class researchers, exploring 'imperial narratives' dominating the feminist and LGBTQ activist transnational imagined community of belonging. It argues for the importance of recognizing the transnational space as a space in its own right, with different positions, communities and conflicts stretching around the globe.

Keywords: rainbow flag, transnational imagined communities, LGBTQ, decolonial activism, Pakistan

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Introduction

In the autumn of 2016, during the writing of this article,[1] progressive struggles to challenge and change norms on gender and sexuality were articulated and documented worldwide. Some of these struggles were appropriated by various national agencies, others severely threatened by such agencies. Norms on gender and sexuality are important issues for conservative fundamentalist forces in the North and South, West and East, for right wing fascist parties and movements, and for a multi-layered complex civil society with activists around the globe (Puar 2007, Alston 2012, Mulinari 2016). As researchers interested in the struggles in different parts of the world it has become obvious that the struggle for change is taking place on a transnational as well as on a local level. We wanted to study these multidirectional and unpredictable struggles for change from a transnational perspective in order to learn more about the connections as well as the divides. The question was how to do it?

Exploring and deconstructing the work of NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) has been a dominant way of studying civil societies for decades (Lilja & Åberg 2012, Bernal & Grewal 2014). Our ambition is to generate knowledge about more dynamic, messy expressions of civil society, paying attention not only to the material conditions for organizing, but to the frictions in the connections and relations between organizations and to alternative communities and struggles going on outside the organizations. Another, even more important ambition is to find approaches and methods that do not reproduce one-directional narratives (Law & Lin 2015). Postcolonial scholars have criticized NGOs and feminist scholars from the North and West for reiterating Western colonial meta-narratives, for example the notion that women's rights, gender equality and sexual rights has its origin in the West and is then diffused out into the world, from the centre to the periphery (cf. Mohanty 2003, Rofel 2007, Spivak 2008).

In an effort to find other approaches to struggles for social change than the ones consolidated in organizations we decided to explore the function of cultural products in emerging transnational communities connected to struggles against normative gender and sexuality norms. This article follows the rainbow flag as a transnationally recognized cultural product, which points to other processes of community building than that of organizing in NGOs. The rainbow flag points to the existence of global discriminatory practices, but it also signals the possibility of a joint struggle with people you might never be able to meet but who have the same problems as you do.

Our interest in transnational struggles for social change has for over a decade brought us to Pakistan, to activists mobilizing for workers' and women's rights among the subaltern and to trans activists fighting for state recognition. Studying the transformation of norms on gender and sexuality from a transnational point

of view, Pakistan is particularly interesting. It is a country marked by a postcolonial situation, where discussions on gender and sexuality are related to transnational biopolitics (Rouse 2006). Pakistani feminist activists challenge narratives that place the origins of feminist struggle in the West and they claim that there is a need to rewrite the history (Shaheed & Shaheed 2004). In the context of this article it is also important to point out that mainstream Pakistani women's rights and feminist organizations are criticized by scholars like Nighat Khan for not being engaged in the struggle for LGBTQ rights.[2] (Khan 2009). Pakistan is a country with a legislation, stemming from the colonial era, which criminalizes sodomy.[3] But it is also one of few countries in the world that provide its trans citizens with the option of having identification cards that state their trans status. In Pakistan, struggles against hegemonic norms on gender and sexuality are transnational and local and this positions us, as academics from Sweden, in a situation that requires us to reflexively analyse our own positions in the encounters with Pakistani activists, analyzes that can generate knowledge about the transnational communities and spaces we study.

Our aim is to study the emergence and possible impact of transnational communities with a starting point in Pakistan and activist struggles to transform norms on gender and sexuality. We ask what the rainbow flag, along with other artefacts and agents, does and what role it plays in these struggles. What can it teach us about different transnational and translocal situations and communities, about the North/South and West/East divide? What can it tell us about transnational positions of researchers? And, finally, what can it teach us about class and political communities, national, translocal or transnational?

Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives and Practices

The overall premise of this article is that cultural products like the rainbow flag do not have stable origins that can be traced once and for all. But we argue that the rainbow flag, as a cultural product, has generated the idea that a substantial amount of people that do not conform to normative ideals about gender and sexuality, around the globe, experience similar exposure to discrimination and violence, and that they can be united, i.e. the idea that a transnational community can emerge. As such the rainbow flag can be said to mobilize social change. In this article we argue that the rainbow flag can be understood as an active part of the creation of a community and not merely as a representation of an already existing one. By following the rainbow flag we can highlight the unpredictable function of cultural products in the on-going emergence of communities, and contribute to an understanding of communities that does not stop at human interaction, but also considers other material and non-material objects and processes. Inspired

by feminist theorists like Karen Barad and Donna Haraway we are interested in what the rainbow flag, but also other materialities such as clothes and books, do, how they function, how they make connections and disconnections possible and how they affect us and make us feel (cf. Haraway 1991, Rouse 2006, Barad 2007). Drawing on Judith Butler's discussion on the right to appear (2015) we want to discuss the possibilities for transnational spaces – i.e. spaces that emerge beyond and between nations, but that are still dependent on nations to be alternative public spaces – to appear and be recognized in the absence of legitimacy from the state or in direct opposition towards it.

As stated, our theoretical starting point is that the rainbow flag can be understood through its performative capacity. While it is often described as a symbol that challenges heteronormative hegemonies and contributes to the possibility for individuals and groups to recognize and identify themselves with a transnational movement, its performative agency is hard to predict. For example, it can contribute to problematic constructions of imagined national communities, i.e. the notion that you have a lot in common with people living in the same nation even if you have never met the majority of them (Anderson 1983). The rainbow flag becomes an important cultural product and symbol when nations like the U.S., Israel and Sweden describe themselves as consisting of modern, liberal and tolerant inhabitants, sympathetic towards LGBTQ groups. For example, the rainbow flag was featured on a Swedish stamp in 2016. This continuously formation of a national imagined community, presumed to be superior in relation to other nations when it comes to being supportive of LGBTQ rights, is what Jasbir Puar (2007) defines as an expression of homonationalism. Scholars like Puar and Sara Ahmed have pointed out how such notions of exceptionality – narratives of excellence where national populations come to believe in their own superiority and singularity – orient us not only on an individual level, in terms of our sense of national belonging, but also on national and transnational levels, affecting for example nations' foreign affairs and immigration politics as well as UN's work on human rights, crisis intervention etc. (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2007). These processes of homonationalism are indicative of the postcolonial situation, in which the North and West portraits itself and acts as the leading region telling others what to do.

Though our focus is on the rainbow flag and its conflictual role in transnational politics we are also interested in formations of class and inequality in the communities we study, and in understanding class as a transnational community. Class is not a more fundamental category than for example gender or nationality (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). However, class formations are intimately entangled with formations of race, genders and sexualities.

Taking our departure in previous theories on imagined communities we want to discuss the idea of transnational, imagined communities in relation to the rain-

bow flag and to class. In line with this we are interested in the emotional and affective aspects of community formation. We turn to Nira Yuval Davies' concept of communities of belonging, arguing that belonging is about emotional attachment, feeling at home, maybe also feeling safe (Yuval Davies 2006). Belonging can also generate feelings of being trapped; such affective connections both sustain and put strain on communities. Another inspiration is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who uses the concept *friction* to study global connections not as the unfolding of a universal model of cause and effect but as something that gets charged and enacted in the "sticky materiality of practical encounters" (Tsing 2005: 1). Tsing problematizes notions of globality as something that can be reduced to a matter of the free flow of capital, humans and discourses and emphasizes the productive character of friction, pointing out that "heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing 2005: 5). Our approach is that the rainbow flag can be followed in its rhizomatic emergences, i.e. in how it materializes in decentralized connections and frictional relations with norms and other artefacts, in multi-directional and far from predictable ways (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Following the flag

Methodologically, what does it mean to follow the rainbow flag? For sake of concretization a couple of clarifications need to be made. First off: our understanding of the rainbow flag is based on dynamic definition of what constitutes a rainbow flag. The rainbow flag is often described as having its origin in the gay community of late 1970s San Francisco, when Gilbert Baker designed what is considered to be the original rainbow flag.[4] This narrative of origin conceals the power of the rainbow symbol, which has broader and deeper genealogies, traceable in both religious and profane textual and visual sources. While these other genealogies might be part of what makes the rainbow flag so easy to recognize and acknowledge, they are often overshadowed by the connotations to sexual rights. In other words, the rainbow flag, as a cultural product, is coloured by a hegemonic, postcolonial narrative of how sexual liberation, as part of liberal and modern values, spreads from the North and West to other parts of the world, a type of narrative that has been problematized by postcolonial scholars (Massad 2007, Shah 2014).

Secondly, and connected to the dynamic definition of the rainbow flag, what is important to our analysis is how the rainbow theme is connected to the struggles of changing norms on gender and sexualities. We follow the rainbow colours regardless of the shape they appear in, whether as a rainbow on a poster, or on a bracelet etc., and treat them as variants of the rainbow flag.

Thirdly, to concretize following as an ethnographic method, we have found inspiration in cultural theorist Inderpal Grewal's iconic study of Barbie as a travel-

ling cultural product. Grewal follows Barbie as the doll, and all that comes with it, is launched in India. Through following Barbie Grewal shows how constructions of communities of belonging, identities and subject formations are entangled in transnational, national and local discourses of gender, class, race, religion and consumerism, often resulting in contradictory subject formations (Grewal 2005).

In line with Grewal and Tsing we are wary of the limitations of the nation as an analytical framework, i.e. methodological nationalism (Winner & Glick Schiller 2002). Following the rainbow flag has given us possibilities to explore the specifics of the transnational sphere, which is imperative for studies on community building. We understand the transnational sphere as a space in its own right. It is full of frictions, a space in which subject positions are formed in relation to one another in normative inclusions and exclusions. This transnational space both conditioned and made the meetings and interviews this article is based on possible. It situated our writing and oriented us in our following of the rainbow flag (Ahmed 2007, Barad 2007). With this said we want to emphasize that local and transnational discourses are conditioned by one another, and both have an impact on the emergences of imagined communities of belonging. The term *translocality* captures both this co-constitutional relationship between the transnational and the local, and the moments when the local and the transnational merge in often unpredictable ways (Brickell & Datta 2011, Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013).

Material

The method of following meant using a variety of different channels to search for potential materials. In addition to using search engines like Google we have scouted Pakistani media (news papers and blogs connected to them, publishing in English) and used our contacts with feminist and trans activists to spread the word, and then followed these leads.

The rainbow flag brought us to loosely organized communities, public meetings, to meetings with individuals, and to international NGOs. For this article we have chosen to focus on three of these encounters. The selection has been made with several aspects in mind, the most important one being that these particular encounters, in an intensified way, sparked rich conversations on community and community building. A second aspect is contrast; we have chosen encounters that are complementary in relation to one another, to show the reader the breadth of the material. The different encounters speak to the variations in how the rainbow flag is part of context specific entanglements. Sometimes the rainbow flag is held back, sometimes it becomes part of a public performance. We also weighed in the fact that we wanted the encounters to express moments where norms on gender and sexuality were either reiterated or challenged. Since we consider our role in these encounters to be part of these entanglements where the rainbow flag plays a

part, auto-ethnographic reflections became part of our material and method. The focus of these reflections is an analysis of our own participation in the creation of communities of belonging. Our point of departure is informed by our previous conversations with Pakistani activists and intellectuals and by postcolonial and decolonial descriptions of the hegemonic frames of transnational conversations, on what counts as legitimate knowledge production and how certain knowledge claims are subjugated. Following Gayatri Spivak, we have asked the question: who does the theorizing and who is the material? (Spivak 2008, cf. Mohanty 2003).

The Bookstore: a Transnational Room

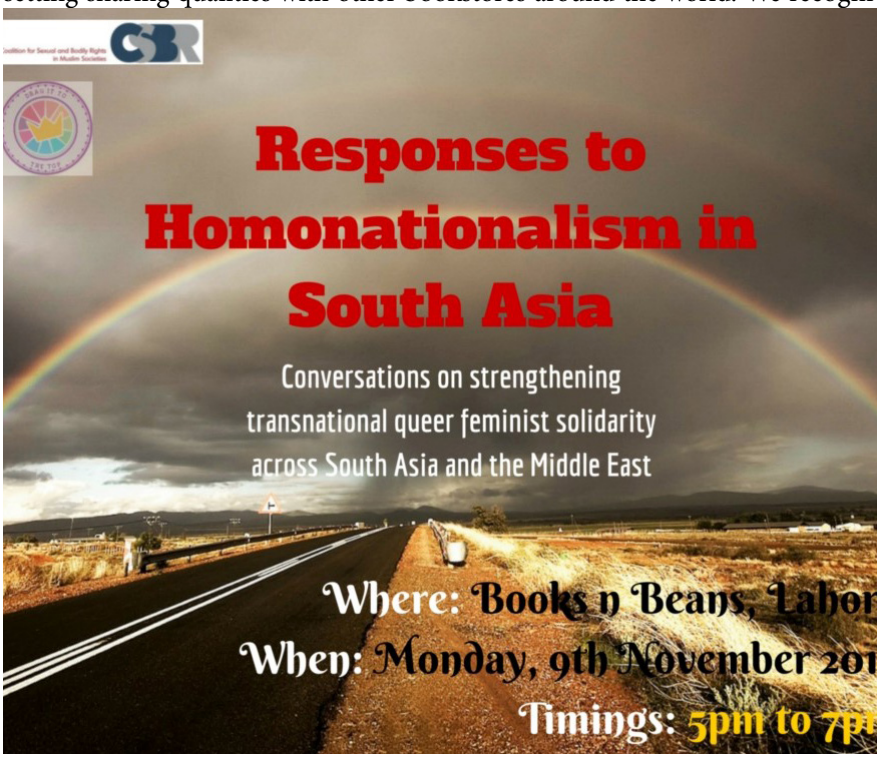
In the autumn of 2015 we attended an event in Lahore arranged by CSBR (Coalition of Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies) and *Drag it to the top*.[5] The poster for the event, published online and distributed on paper, featured a large rainbow over a wasteland with an empty road running across it. The *Drag it to the top* logo, located in the top left corner of the poster, featured a rainbow-coloured ornament. The rainbow worked as an affective bounding sign, interpellating us this evening. The poster was published in English and therefore spoke to us in a very literal way. And so did the title of the seminar: "Responses to Homonationalism in South Asia: Conversations on strengthening transnational queer feminist solidarity across South Asia and the Middle East". The academic terms, familiar to us through the works of Puar and others, simultaneously drew us near, making us interested in the seminar, and made us want to take a step back; they had us questioning if this really was a conversation in which we should participate, despite being invited by the organizers. Puar coined the term homonationalism as a way to conceptualize the fact that some nations in the global North and West construct themselves as modern, tolerant and progressive through a rhetoric of gay rights, thereby framing other nations, often situated in the global South and East, as homophobic, backward and conservative in need to learn from countries in West. Puar points to the imperial effects and colonial roots of these processes, but also to the tension between official celebrations of gay rights and bureaucratic systems that condone and reinstate homophobia and transphobia as material effects of heteronormative and cisnormative discourses (Puar 2007, 2013). Homonationalism shapes national imagined communities and national identities. At the time of writing this article Swedish newspapers ran an advertisement (or infomercial) for the Swedish national defence in the form of a photograph. The photograph depicts a facade of a house with a balcony from which a rainbow flag is hoisted, with a text reading:

> Sweden, a country to fall in love with. The freedom to live as one wishes, with whom one wishes, is far from irrefutable in the world. But it is ir-

> refutable to us. And it is worth defending. For an overview on how and why we stand up for Sweden, here and now, visit forsvarsmakten.se. For you new, you free [a reference to the Swedish national anthem, which begins "Thou ancient, thou free"].[6]

While this ad is a very crude version of how a nation is portrayed as the home of the free through the projection of homophobia, misogyny and so called traditional values onto other nations, it is only a more explicit version of often implicit processes that result in the constructions of national imagined communities, and in this case postulations on how to identify as a Swede (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2007). The poster of the seminar we planned to attend signalled something more than a critique of these processes, processes we were highly entangled in. The subtitle suggested that there are other transnational connections than those that centre on the North and West, stating: "Conversations on strengthening transnational queer feminist solidarity across South Asia and the Middle East". The centre of the postcolonial narrative, the North and West, is displaced, and potentially provincialized.

The event was held at the bookstore Books n Beans, in many ways a transnational setting sharing qualities with other bookstores around the world. We recogni-



Poster for event "Responses to Homonationalism in South Asia". November 2015.

zed similarities with bookstores in Stockholm, Berlin, New York and San Francisco; the bookshelves in wood, the literature and the ways to categorize it, the display of pens of all colours and sizes placed at the counter like candy for the eye. The coffee and tea bar with soft armchairs and sofas located in a corner of the store contributed to a familiar and cosy atmosphere. Having a chat or discussing books, or to simply read, over a cup of coffee or tea is a worldwide phenomenon, and as such it is both emerging from but also influencing many different old and local traditions. While waiting for the event to start we walked around among the bookshelves, knowing very well what to look for and how to act in a bookstore like this. The seminar and its poster brought the rainbow flag into the store, and the rainbow flag was hence connected to intellectualism, to reading and reflection; and vice versa, through its connection with the rainbow flag, the bookstore could be identified as a radical space, standing up for tolerance and modernity. This fusion also created a sense of familiarity for us, so despite the hesitations we'd had about our own presence as academics from homonationalistic Sweden, the bookstore put us at ease, and we felt comfortable and well oriented. When people started to arrive to the seminar it became obvious that we were taking part in an on-going formation of an imagined transnational middle class community. The connections between the bookstore, books, literary conversations in English, the academic theme of the evening, and the rainbow flag itself, made up a sphere that differentiated between those that had access through literacy, education and those who did not. Although formal education and literacy are not in themselves necessary in order for someone to be a knowledgeable, reflective subject – in fact, non-formal training is and has been very important for social justice struggles among poor and illiterate people[7] (Martinsson 2016) – the ability to read and take part in governing transnational and national discussions about politics can be pivotal in the formation of critical and political subjectivities and the mobilising of political alternatives (Spivak 2008, Hussein 2012). In a Pakistani context, class-differentiating practices are very efficient in subjecting certain parts of the population to conditions that make literacy a hard won struggle. Pakistan is a country with millions of illiterate children;[8] where government schools are heavily criticized for only providing non-critical teaching with very limited possibilities to imagine other ways of organizing society, of understanding oneself, or of taking part in literary spheres. Access to transnational connections, books, the English language and discussions about the rainbow flag is stratified. The exclusion of the subaltern groups, is, as Gayatri Spivak underlines, a reproduction of class society (Spivak 2008, 2012, Hussain 2012, Siddiqui 2012). The recreation of a classed transnational imagined community of belonging, exemplified here with the evening at the bookstore, is the other side of this process, making the middle class feel comfortable, modern and tolerant and more or less united over the globe

(cf. Ahmed 2004).

It is as important to scrutinize this banal and mundane normalization of an on-going transnational middle class formation, as it is to recognize the bodily different positions connected to homonationalism. The West/East and North/South divide became very visible and unavoidable this night. It was impossible not to recognize the two of us as coming from the North-West. Apart from two men, one dressed in Western clothes and the other in Pakistani, all of us had hybrid styles of dressing, wearing kameez over jeans and dupattas over our shoulders. But we, two Swedish academics, still did not pass as Pakistani women. The colour of our skin, and the fact that people had to address us in English, connected us to the West, to colonial discourses and to the colonizing countries of the past and the present.

A frictional 'national symbol'

One of the conversations during the evening revolved around the necessity of using regional identity categories and indigenous vocabulary (Massad 2007, Spivak 2008). Questions were posed on what could be considered indigenous or local categories for non-heteronormative and gender non-conformative identities and expressions in Pakistan, followed by a rather heated discussion on how terminology often becomes heavily conditioned by transnational discourses and about the travelling of terms and concepts in a globalized world. One of the participants resented the notion, expressed by some of the others, that the term gay is imperialistic in itself simply because it stems from an Anglo Saxon linguistic context. He argued that no one has the right to dictate the terminology he chooses for himself. The discussion on terminology also uncovered other frictions within the transnational imagined community of belonging mobilized by the rainbow flag. The term *Khwaja Sira* was identified as an indigenous term used by people who do not conform to a Western binary model of sex and gender (to explain the term Khwaja Sira the Anglo Saxon term transgender was used, which indicates not only how conditioned by a Western language the general understanding of Khwaja Sira is, but also the complexity of translating terminology in a transnational setting). Some of the participants talked at length about the role of Khwaja Sira communities in Pakistani society and we recognized the narrative not only from conversations we had had with informants during previous fieldwork but also from media and official documents (for example in documentation of litigation in court cases and in government policy documents). You could sum it up in the following way: Khwaja Sira communities used to be highly respected but now they live their lives at the fringes of society due to the rapid changes of the modern world order (cf. *The Express Tribune* 2010, Human Rights Case NOS.63 of 2009). It is said that the role the Khwaja Siras used to have in maintaining the average citizen's good life – blessing new-born sons, cursing those who had faulted in society's eyes, and

performing at weddings and other occasions – has been rationalized to a minimum and that sex work and begging are common strategies for survival in a harsh and stigmatizing cultural climate.[9] In the context of the conversation at Books n Beans the reiteration of this type of narratives about the conditions for Khwaja Siras seemed to function as a way to constitute Khwaja Siras as a "national" symbol, representing a national past of unity that has been compromised (cf. Bacchetta 2002). This figuration generated at least three, partially conflictual projections onto the Khwaja Sira community. On the one hand, Khwaja Siras were described as indigenous to a geographically rooted culture in a way that signalled cultural authenticity in a conversation that revolved around the historical effects of colonialism and the acidic alliance of postcolonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism. That Khwaja Siras were positioned as indigenous seemed to assume that they were untainted by colonial and postcolonial malformations. On the other hand Khwaja Siras were also described as tainted by conservative values in their view on homosexuality. Some described Khwaja Siras as playing into the hands of those Pakistani religious and political leaders that condemn homosexuality. Thirdly, Khwaja Siras are described by others – researchers, journalists, advocacy activists, government officials, and Pakistani intellectuals – as an impoverished and discriminated community, lacking both economical means and education (Chaudhary & Shah 2009, Rehan 2009, Rehan 2011, Redding 2015).

It is worth mentioning that in our interviews with members of Khwaja Sira led organizations (conducted during previous fieldwork) they have described themselves as marginalized from transnational communities by way of language and lack of education. We have heard testimonies of how transnational contacts in general and donors in particular tend to turn to organizations fronted by people who speak fluent English. At the same time Khwaja Sira leaders have, in interviews, refuted claims that they lack international networks and contacts. In the words of an influential community leader in Karachi (as translated to us by our translator) on the subject of transnational contacts: "You can google me, and find me directly, people know me, I am an ambassador; people recognize me and say 'we have read about you'. The international community knows me". As she saw it, the problem was not that she and other Khwaja Sira leaders are not visible or approachable, but rather that donors tended to favour people who were fluent in English, and hence the issue of education and experiences of international mobility became pivotal. Despite her extensive experience in community based work and her contacts with local government, the Karachi based leader and her organization were often overlooked, and she was questioning the rationale behind the situation. "If I do not speak English, does this mean that I do not know how to work with projects?". It seems as if the frictions between transnational and translocal discourses and practices play out in a particular way in the experiences of

this Khwaja Sira leader, and others with her. They explicitly address transnational imagined communities such as human rights activists, trans rights activists, and donors investing in poverty relief, education and community building, using social media and national and international press. But they also interpellate the Pakistani state as a failing welfare state with an unfulfilled responsibility towards its citizens. They use transnational discourses of human rights to position themselves as recognizable citizens of Pakistan, who have been misrecognized and discriminated against, but they also use translocal discourses on the respectable subject of the state to construct themselves as accountable citizens (Khan 2016). Given the narratives about Khwaja Siras as isolated and not transnationally mobile, conveyed in our encounters with Pakistani cosmopolitical intellectuals mobilized by the rainbow flag, these frictions are important to point out. The fact that the participants at the seminar at Books n Beans reiterated narratives about the Khwaja Sira community, and hence brought us back to our previous encounters with Khwaja Sira leaders, is an example of how following the rainbow flag brought us to people and communities who did not themselves necessarily use the rainbow flag.

The Messiness of Community Building

In the outskirts of one of the larger cities in Pakistan, in an upper class neighbourhood, we were invited into the home of one of the founders of an activist organization dedicated to, as they express it on their web site, "the protection of the rights of sexual minorities, specifically LGBTQI people".[10] We had noticed how they used the rainbow colors in the logo on their homepage. The two activists, S. and K., were self-identified lesbians, out to friends and family, and Pakistani citizens, now pursuing doctoral degrees in the U.S. The conversation flowed smoothly in English. S., one of the activists, commented on the ease of the dialogue, "It is so easy for us to communicate right now. You know it is because we have attended institutions, we have been trained in that way …". The importance of language – in advocacy work, in the constitution of communities of belonging, and of course in academic work – was something that was discussed explicitly, at length. S. reflected upon how she was able to shift between different languages so smoothly, nearly without thinking about it. As a group we reflected on our common intellectual references, the majority of them from U.S. and U.K. scholarships. We were all borrowing concepts and theories from Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, Jasbir Puar and Sara Ahmed. We belong to a transnational imagined community of middle class, Gender Studies scholars, feminist academics, all part of the same, stratified, imagined community of belonging. Our sense of belonging became so strong during that particular meeting that we started to talk about it as a problem. There were differences between the imagined community of belonging that we ended up ar-

ticulating among ourselves at S.'s house, and the one we were called into at Books n Beans. Both were examples of on-going, discursive and material formations of middle and upper class privileged milieus. Both were translocal in the sense that they were formations of transnational discourses on LGBTQ advocacy and critiques of postcoloniality with direct references to how imperial narratives from the global North and West have conditioned local organization and advocacy work. However, while we were called into an imagined community of belonging at the bookstore in our capacity as scholars studying transnational discourses of LGBTQ advocacy we were also identified as other to the community, as scholars from the global North and West. With S. and K. the connections were more persistent than the disconnections, perhaps because we explicitly articulated our different positions, discussed our privileges and connected in our scholarly analysis of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, postcoloniality and neoliberalism. The critique of capitalism, of global neoliberal processes, and their relations to local feudal principles enabling, for example, bonded labour and forced marriage, connected us, perhaps precisely because we were talking about how that very same neoliberal normativity (cf. Brown 2015) enabled us to meet, to travel, to study and to make transnational connections. The transnational space we inhabited was full of frictions, reminding us of our privileges and the need to subvert them. For example, the notion of Sweden as a nation with a tolerant attitude towards gender non-normative expressions and queer sexualities, and a country shaped by state feminism and mainstreamed gender equality, oriented our discussions. S. and K. asked us questions about the state of the nation; we were understood as representatives of a utopian country, despite our efforts to deconstruct this Swedish exceptionalism in our conversation (Habel 2012, Martinsson, Griffin & Giritli Nygren 2016).

The conversation about language also addressed the travelling terminology of LGBTQ advocacy. When K. and S. founded the organization one of the pressing issues was to define terms in the local languages and modify some of the Urdu terminology to rid it of pathologizing connotations. When asked if they had had any hesitations about using Anglo Saxon terminology on the website and in advocacy work they both laughed:

> Yes! We had a long conversation about that. Because, I mean, LGBT, at the end of the words there are identities. [...] They have a certain meaning and investment point. Now that same meaning is virtually untranslatable. So when we use LGBT we use it vaguely, loosely.

S. and K. described how the locally used terminology deals with other parameters than the transnationally used terminology. They used the spectrum of trans identities as an example, explaining how terms like Khwaja Sira, zanana and hijra

connote historically forged identities with their own traditions and historically specific identities, and how these terms, and the experiences of marginalization that they connote, are hard to translate into transnationally comprehensive terms. The very situatedness of them gets lost in translation.

Staying under the radar

Our first contact with K. and S. was, as already mentioned, through the website for their organization. The website features texts on the issue of LGBTQ rights and advocacy, in both English and Urdu. The texts are informative, they talk about homosexuality, trans experiences, homophobia and desire in a straightforward way. The organization's logo, placed in the top left corner of the website, is a stylized composition of several filled circles of rainbow colors overlapping each other. We asked about the logo and ended up in a conversation about the art of weighing the desire to use the rainbow flag, as an established symbol for LGBTQ rights, with the risk of being targeted by homophobic and transphobic hate mongers. So while the texts are to the point and contain no meta-phrasing, the logo seeks to remind visitors to the website, metaphorically, of an on-going transnational struggle, but it is also discrete in its connotations to the rainbow flag. *It is held back.* The potential of the flag is not utilized. It is like K. and S. wanted to stay under the radar, something that they also expressed, explicitly. When asked if the average Pakistani citizen would recognize the rainbow flag as connoting LGBTQ rights or queerness, they described how the awareness of these connotations have come fairly recently, and quite suddenly. The Facebook campaign with a rainbow coloured profile filter, celebrating the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overrule state bans on gay marriage, was pivotal, according to K. and S. However, they also said that in Pakistan the rainbow flag is almost exclusively utilized by people that are mobile and have travelled abroad, i.e. people who belong to what they call "the transnational circuit". For K. and S. the rainbow flag seems to be generating friction in itself; it might call people in – functioning as binding an imagined community together – but is also a symbol of how questions of social justice have become commercialized and reduced to liberal rights rhetoric. The fact that it took a Facebook campaign celebrating gay U.S. citizens' right to marry for a larger group of the Pakistani population to acknowledge the rainbow flag as a symbol for LGBTQ rights is, if you ask K. and S., in itself problematic since, once again, it puts the U.S. in the centre and neglects other local struggles.

The discrete use of the rainbow flag was not the only friction discussed during the meeting. When discussing the forms of organizing, a complex picture of the conditions for mobilizing social justice work without falling into the obvious traps of becoming dependent on funding from international donors or having one's work monitored by government intelligence, was painted. K. and S. described how

they have worked out ways to avoid being identified by the government as an advocacy organization, since such a classification severely conditions the possibilities of working with the issues they want to address. S. characterized the Pakistani state as a combination of a failed welfare state, a successful violent state, and a completely negligent state, adding that she and K. try to fit themselves "into the pocket of negligence", trying to not engage with the state at all, and not expect anything from it. The only reason they registered the organization at all was to be able to receive money from donors, but since all money that comes in is being scrutinized by the state, it has only led to problems. Their experiences with receiving funding for a community based study of violence, through a research project funded by an international donor, have left them with the feeling that money can complicate the delicate processes of community building since it creates bad blood in the community with accusations of who was hired to do the work, and how the money was spent: "Money fucks everything up".

Throughout the conversation it became clear that S. and K. experienced frictions between LGBT politics, which they described as identity politics, focused on representation and state protection in the form of legislation around for example hate speech but also the right to marriage, and queer politics. They claimed that LGBT politics is what orients the type of advocacy that gets funded in Pakistan; it attracts interest from international donors, follows a transnationally dominated understanding of what is needed and is not guided by local imperatives. HIV/AIDS prevention programs targeting sex workers is high on the agenda, community building and poverty alleviation is not. S. and K. expressed concern over the fact that dependency on international, and national, funding has come to orient activist work in a way that they see as problematic. Their story points towards the friction between state surveillance and state recognition, but also to the friction between being included in a transnational imagined community of LGBTQ advocacy and the potential problems with such an imagined community, in the form of neocolonial effects of having a Western and Northern master narrative of LGBTQ rights being the dominant modus operandi. They concluded that perhaps radical social justice work is incompatible with the economic form of organizing that has become so dominant, the NGO. "Movement building can not be funded, movement building has to have activists who are committed to that movement [...] because that is their politics."

The flag, the state and the activist

The third encounter, led by the rainbow flag, came about through our contact with *NAZ Male Health Alliance*, an organization that describes itself as working for men who have sex with men and for the transgender community.[11] We inter-

viewed one of its coordinators, Kami, who identify as a transgender woman. She is a well-known activist for the LGBTQ community. K. and S. had raised the question of which bodies have the possibility to appear and assemble in public, and which ones do not, that need to stay under the radar (Butler 2015). Kami reminded us of the same thing. She is very aware of the fact that she, as a transgender woman, inhabits an exposed position. Despite this she is highly visible, and together with other activists she appears in transnational as well as translocal public spaces. For example, she has been part of arranging IDAHOT (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia), an annual event where the role of the rainbow flag is very important as a visible cultural product that connects transnational communities of belonging around the globe. When IDAHOT is celebrated in Pakistan its translocal conditions are articulated in a way that stresses the gravity of the situation:

> Despite the threat of violence present in Pakistan's current climate, national campaigners from Naz Pakistan bravely held an event to mark IDAHOT 2016. On May 15 the group hosted a drag show and panel discussion on trans and LGB discrimination in the country, specifically focusing on the psychological impact of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. The event featured performances from members of the local LGBT community and also saw the crowning of 'Miss Naz Pakistan 2016'[12]

To be visible as an assembly of bodies, exercising one's right to appear, is a performative act, what Butler calls a "bodily demand for a more liveable set of lives" (2015: 25). Kami doesn't hide her name, face or body. She is highly visible. Some years ago, she and her boyfriend were featured in the BBC documentary *How Gay is Pakistan?* as advocates for the gay community.[13] When Kami came to our meeting she wore a bracelet in rainbow colors. We asked her about it:

> I wear this, some ask: Why do you wear this bracelet, I say, I love these colour. Maybe I like purple, yellow, red. I feel myself very lucky and I am very proud to be part of this community, even if I am a trans, lesbian whatever. I am very happy, and if you are happy, no one can beat you, no one can fight with you.

Compared to the ambivalent attitudes towards the rainbow flag we encountered in the bookstore and at S and K's place, Kami's relationship with it was more unequivocal. For her, the colours of the rainbow is an expression of her own happiness and the community. It is the bringing together of the two that makes her

strong. The interview ended up focusing on her and her activism rather than the organization she works for. Kami talked about her activism as reaching out to the transgender community, and she underlined that she is a transgender woman, not a Khwaja Sira. She told us that Khwaja Sira is a description of a kinship structure with a long history. Kami neither wants to, nor can, identify exclusively with this "family". She described herself as an activist who fights together with others for change, rather than as part of a family with a specific culture. In her story the idea of the Khwaja Sira community as a kinship structure stand in sharp contrast to the idea of the individual activist as an agent of change in collaboration with other activists. She came back to the role of the individual on several occasions and criticized the common narrative, often displayed in media, that the nation state is



Kami with Pakistani flag and rainbow flag, Aks film festival event in 2016. Kami Sid©

responsible for the problems transgender people have. She argued that it is a personal responsibility to be respectable in order to be respected: "To me it is not fair […] to blame society every time, because there have been a lot of possibilities for our community, [...] I think so now that it is up to every persons how they look like."

She told us that there have been no obstacles for her to go to university, no one bothers her as long as she is respectable. "If you will play another positive role in society they will accept you, so it is not fair to blame society". In this discussion Kami did not interpellate the state to act. She seems to approach the state from a liberal point of view. The state is not the subject for change and responsibility. Instead, at this occasion, she urged transgender people to behave and dress in accordance with what is perceived of as respectable.

Kami did not address the state but, but she challenged the notions of who can be counted as citizens. Some months after the interview, Kami published a photo of herself on Facebook. She holds the Pakistani flag and the rainbow flag close together. They melt into each other and create the illusion that they are part of the same flag. One might think that the Pakistani national flag would be in a very frictional relation with the rainbow flag, given the legislation, which criminalizes sodomy. One of her friends commented that it was a courageous act to publish such a photo. Kami wrote us and explained her thoughts regarding this image:

> For me journey of life is full of rainbow colour, without this rainbow flag I believe with Pakistani flag [it] is just a flag for me. Independence means [that] everyone live there lives in their own way whether they are [from] any of the LGBTI spectrum or from heterosexual society. This picture means a lot for me. I carry my country flag with my own community flag…

If we understand Kami correctly, the rainbow flag does something to the Pakistani flag. Without the rainbow flag it is "just a flag", and here Kami's dismissal of the Pakistani flag can be understood as a political stance. It is only together with the rainbow flag that the Pakistani flag achieves a meaning she can embrace and thus becomes politically important to her. In Kami's fusion of the two flags, and her description of what this means to her, something happens with the notion of citizenship as well; it becomes associated with every citizen's right to live their lives in their own way. Another, but related, way of understanding this photo is to see it as an interpellation to the state; the fusion of the two flags forms a political vision. The fusion between the two pieces of cloth might challenge what is thought of as politically possible to recognize and strive for, and challenge the notions of which bodies count as citizens (cf. Butler 2015). It is a necessary fantasy about the future. To refuse to understand the flags as contradictory, inherently incommensurable, is a performative act (cf. Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

The Rainbow Flag as Friction: a Conclusion

Even if the material in this article primarily comes from Pakistan and from very physical rooms like a bookstore and a house in an upper class area, the focus has been on a transnational space, a space, we argue, in need of being recognized as a space in its own right. This space consists of different communities stretching around the globe, but is also connected to national imagined communities of belonging that emerge in frictional relation to other nations and communities.

Inspired by Anderson (1983), we have discerned not only national but also transnational imagined communities; alternative imagined communities like those connected through the rainbow flag, or that of an educated critical political middle class. We have also given examples of how people, like ourselves, have different positions in this transnational space, and in the many communities that together constitute this space due to formations of national belonging, gender, sexualities and class. In a world shaped by globalization, it is also important to pay attention to the way nations work as entities in the transnational sphere. The rainbow flag is part of the on-going emergence of Sweden as an imagined homonationalistic community worth protection from the military. When Kami fuses the rainbow flag with the Pakistani national flag, she connects a transnational community with a national one. The encounter at the bookstore shows the dynamics of the affective processes of community building; the set up that made us feel at home in the transnational community – the homonationalistic theme – was also a factor generating friction in the community. The examples show that the transnational space is politically important, and that it is a space for struggle as well as a space of resources. It offers possibilities to find alternative communities when the state turns you down. Together these examples show the contradictory roles of the transnational space and of the rainbow flag. We find these contradictions political important in themselves, because they make it obvious that there are different ways to organize life (Mouffe 2013). However, the access to this transnational political space is stratified and not equal. Our three cases have shown how large groups of people, such as subaltern illiterates, are not invited into these transnational settings, and not given the chance to politically take part in the activities there. Groups with limited knowledge in English, for example, are marginalized as traditional and risk being stopped and more or less excluded from the transnational space.

We have argued for the need to understand the rainbow flag as part of affective entanglements that both conserve and challenge societal norms. The rainbow flag is an example of non-verbal performative enactments that bring about frictions and exclusions, but also generate situations in which it is possible for otherwise non-visible, or at least not representable, bodies to appear in public spaces. The rainbow flag makes transnational communities visible and reachable; it connects

not only people to each other, but also connects people to the ideas and practices of universal rights beyond nations and nation states. It can be understood as a sign of political recognition in itself, but it also generates conversations and practices that bolster the emergence of political subjectivity and make political claims aimed at the state possible. We argue that the frictions generated by the rainbow flag create transnational and translocal positions that make it possible to politicize state misrecognition, but also misrecognition within other imagined communities of belonging, whether these be national, transnational or translocal.

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Notes

[1] This article is the result of a truly cooperative working process; the collection of the material, the analyses and the writing have been done together, on equal terms.
[2] We use LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer), as an umbrella term for the transnational movement of activists struggling to change normative notions of gender and sexuality. The reason for this is pragmatic; it is the term most of the activists that we have interviewed use themselves. When the activists use other ways of referring to their struggle, or when they discuss the acronym LGBTQ itself as loaded with postcolonial problems, these discussions become part of our material, and discussed as such.
[3] Pakistan Penal code article 377.
[4] For example: http://www.sftravel.com/article/brief-history-rainbow-flag
[5] http://www.csbronline.org/?p=1156
[6] "Sverige, ett land att förälska sig i. Friheten att få leva som man vill, med vem man vill, är långt ifrån självklar här i världen. Men den är självklar för oss. Och självklart värd att försvara. På forsvarsmakten.se kan du se hur och varför vi står upp för Sverige, här och nu. För du nya, du fria." October 2016.
[7] For example, www.ektaparishad.com

[8] According to Human Rights Commission Pakistan (HRCP 2014), over 5 million children do not go to school. Alif Ailaan's corresponding figures are 25 million children out of school (http://www.alifailaan.pk/).

[9] Depending on context and who is telling the story, what gets constructed as "the past" differs. For example, some locate this past in the period before the region was parted from India, others in the period before British imperial rule.

[10] The inclusion of the I (for intersex) in the acronym was something we discussed during the interview, but not at length. The activists argued that intersex issues ought to be part of the mobilizing for equal rights, locally and globally.

[11] http://www.apcom.org/2013/05/13/spotlight-naz-male-health-alliance-pakistan/

[12] http://dayagainsthomophobia.org/idahot-report-2016-pakistan/

[13] http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3ao4g6

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