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Cultural Products in Flux

Introduction to *The Performative Power of Cultural Products in the Making of Gender, Sexualities, and Transnational Communities*

by Erika Alm, Pia Laskar & Cathrin Wasshede

Normative notions of gender and sexuality, and the way they are contested, (re)-constructed, interpreted and articulated in practice, have been studied within the Humanities and Social sciences at both macro and micro level. Studies of social movements, resistance, organising and community building have been essential in regard to the expansion of this diverse field of knowledge. When scholars have explored communities that emerge as norms of gender and sexuality cross national borders and impact upon transnational spaces, they have often focused on human subjects, organisations, political groups, etcetera (Yuval Davies 2011). However, if we are interested in understanding the complex and dynamic processes behind the formations of communities of belonging in a transnational and digitalised world, we also need new starting points and innovative methodological tools.

This special issue of *Culture Unbound* sets out to explore the function of cultural products in the negotiation and consolidation of transnational communities of belonging, gathering articles that are theoretically and methodologically based on an understanding of cultural products as performative, as boundary objects, floating signifiers, and as actants. The articles follow cultural products like the rainbow flag, the veil, manga, and elongated labia across local and transnational borders and contexts, paying attention to what such a methodological move can tell us about communities of belonging. The authors featured in this special issue acknowledge that cultural products can be used as tools for marketisation and neoliberalism, for religious and secularist purposes, as well as for political strategies, struggles and policies. Through following cultural products transnationally, the authors move in unpredictable directions, uncovering new perspectives and narratives.

Cultural products come into being in complex entanglements with other materialities and discourses such as technologies, artefacts, subjects, norms, desires

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and power structures (Barad 2007, Alaimo & Hekman 2008, Hird 2009, Black 2014). Inspired by theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 1988), feminist scholars have shown how these connections are rhizomatic and erratic, and how paying particular attention to both the materiality and the discursivity of these entanglements points towards a continuation of and a critical intervention into feminist writing troubling with dualism since Simone de Beauvoir (Hinton & van der Tuin 2014).

This special issue focuses on cultural products' agency in relation to transnational communities of belonging, and is thus interwoven with decolonial and postcolonial feminist studies. Cultural notions and practices of femininities, masculinities and sexualities undergo deep transformations globally, as they move between and within the local and the transnational in multiple and messy ways. Feminist decolonial and postcolonial scholars argue that researchers involved in studying these changes tend to move within narrow developmental paradigms that understand gendered progress and progress in relation to sexual rights within the binary frame of traditional versus modern societies. In these types of paradigms, European modernity and secularism are framed as the centre of and the condition for progress. Critics have argued that European civil society, in a modernist/colonial tradition, takes on the "burden" of changing and reorganising issues on gender and sexualities in other parts of the world (Lugones 2010; Quijano 2000; Mohanty 2003; Puar 2007; Massad 2007; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005).

Cultural products can reveal hidden meanings as well as hide other meanings; they are symbols with the ability to sharply address "hot spots" in society. They can accomplish things, they can tear down boundaries or create new boundaries. They do things to us, move us, make us move in different directions and move us emotionally (Ahmed 2004, 2007; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Grewal 2005). The rainbow flag is an excellent example. Analysing the rainbow flag as a boundary object, a floating signifier or actant makes it ambiguous and open to different meanings, as decided by the signifiers. Through a decolonial following of the rainbow flag in three case studies, Pia Laskar, Anna Johansson and Diana Mulinari show how the flag plays a role in marking boundaries between those who belong to accepted and desirable communities, and those who are excluded from them. Drawing on the rainbow flag as a boundary object in three different contexts – and in several communities of belonging – enables the authors to follow constructions of Swedishness in the small town of Södertälje, pinkwashing in the shadow of an Israeli apartheid wall in Palestine, and globalised queer tourism excluding local queer communities in Argentina. Central to their analysis is how the rainbow flag is given a multitude of original and radically different meanings that may challenge the colonial/Eurocentric notions that to a certain extent are embedded in it.

Erika Alm and Lena Martinsson discuss the frictions that the rainbow flag

creates between transnational, national and translocal discourses. Through analysing their own encounters with the rainbow flag in conversations with activists in Pakistan, they reveal the ambivalent role that a transnational rainbow space plays for community building for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) activists in the Pakistani context. The rainbow flag can mobilise an imagined transnational community of belonging, enabling people to politicise 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 as "traditional", such as Khwaja Siras. Alm's and Martinsson's article is also a contribution to a critical discussion about the problem of feeling too comfortable as white, Western, middle-class researchers in some of the Pakistani settings, disclosing imperial narratives that dominate the feminist and LGBTQ activist transnational imagined community of belonging.

David Drissel highlights how the rainbow flag actually transforms and/or neutralises the potential sectarian militancy of the Irish and/or British nationalist flags when the two kinds of flags are combined in the Pride parade in Belfast. The rainbow flag acts both as a transnational symbol, making LGBTQ people all over the world feel connected to one another and as parts of a community of belonging, and, in its locality in Belfast, as a transforming power that recontextualises and reimagines nationalist and unionist symbols. Drissel shows how a heteronormative urban space can be momentarily queered through the use of bodies, rainbow flags, music and other socio-spatial performances, and how this may challenge dominant notions about gender and sexuality in a homophobic context.

Linda Berg and Mikela Lundahl analyse two cases of (un)veiling in France: artwork by Princess Hijab in the Parisian metro and the burkini ban in some towns along the French coast in 2016. The two cases differ from one another, but Berg and Lundahl show how both these hijabising phenomena negotiate how and where Muslim female bodies can inhabit public space. They point to how Western norms around nakedness and clothes (covering skin) have changed over time, and how today the (almost) naked woman is normalised, and even imposed, in public space. Princess Hijab's veiling of the naked models in advertisements in the metro is an unveiling of the white, patriarchal commercial industry as well as a (re)instating of the Muslim female body as the dangerous Other. By contextualising veils and veiling in a discussion about the religious-secular divide the authors problematise questions about integration and freedom.

Although cultural products as material objects are transitory, and sometimes only exist in physical form lasting an hour or so, as in the examples of Princess Hijab's artistic interventions in the Parisian metro, they may have a long life on the Internet and hence contribute to the production of different communities of

belonging. This emphasises the digital aspect of the social world and how the Internet is of special interest for cultural products and their role for communities of belonging (Craig 2013; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Davies 2007). The online rhizomatic circulation involves a constant change of meanings (Davies 2007), a feature that is discussed and explored in Mona Lilja's and Cathrin Wasshede's text about Boys' Love/Yaoi in manga.

Using interviews with Swedish followers of Boys' Love/Yaoi, Lilja and Wasshede study the performativity of manga, focusing on how Boys' Love/Yaoi generates alternative subject positions and practices regarding gender and sexuality. Arguing that Swedish manga users create their own images of Japan that help consolidate their notions of Sweden and Swedishness, Lilja and Wasshede contribute to the growing knowledge of how processes like cultural appropriation, othering and exotisation are part of the construction of national imagined communities. Through coupling feminist theorisations of the inseparability of materiality and signification with Baudrillard's understanding of hyperreality, Lilja and Wasshede also challenge the notion that hyperreality is a surface phenomenon, arguing that cultural products do indeed create new subjectivities and desires.

Hellen Venganai's article "Negotiating identities through the 'cultural practice' of labia elongation among urban Shona women and men in contemporary Zimbabwe" thematises the role of cultural products for communities of belonging by way of looking at the role of the cultural practice of labia elongation in urban Zimbabwe. Venganai shows that modified labia are entangled in transnational, national and local contexts, and can hence be understood in the tradition of body modifications as cultural products (Bordo 1993; Pugliese & Stryker 2009). Taking as her point of departure material that shows that both women that favour labia prolongation and those opposing it position themselves as modern, urban and middle-class, she is challenging and critiquing the notion, expressed in society at large and in some research, of the cultural practice as traditional, rural and backward. Venganai analyses the complex processes of subjectivation by also pointing to inconsistencies in the informants' narratives of creating dynamic identities in plural. In doing so she contributes to decolonial scholarly work on dismantling dominant Eurocentric discourses on African traditional cultural practices linked to sexuality as retrogressive for women.

We regard this special issue as a point of departure for further exploration and theoretical discussions about cultural products and their relevance for communities of belonging, in transnational, national and local settings. In a world where borders can be transgressed by a privileged few and we witness a backlash against social movements that struggle to level the playing field for unprivileged people due to growing nationalism, fascism and racism, it is easy to rely on the notions of unifying, radical and transgressive transnational communities of belonging.

Without losing this hope and trust in political futurity, we need to critically engage in decolonial deconstructions of communities of belonging and the performative power of their supposed floating signifiers or boundary objects: who are those who belong and who are those who do not? How are those boundaries within communities of belonging produced? How are cultural products used in boundary-making processes? What do cultural products do to us and what do we do to them?

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