



## The True (Homonational) North, Strong and Free

OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon, eds. *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015. 224 pages.

### Book review by Clinton Glenn

OmiSoore Dryden and Suzanne Lenon's *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* looks at the contemporary Canadian nation state in order to examine the ways in which white heteropatriarchy structures political and social relations, while reinforcing the myth of the benevolence of Canada towards LGBTQ subjects. Underlining this is the concept of homonationalism, a form of sexual exceptionalism that places the white secular queer subject within the frame of nationalism while simultaneously marginalizing other queer bodies,<sup>1</sup> in particular people of colour and indigenous peoples of Canada. The volume itself attempts to fill a gap in contemporary formulations around homonationalism: namely, that scholarship is predominantly American-centric and rarely looks at other national contexts. In attempting to correct this, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion* presents eight different essays focusing on disparate issues including Canadian nationalism, pinkwashing and the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, queer communities and incarceration, and queer solidarity with Palestine. The goal of the book, as the editors state in the introduction, is "to disorder, unsettle, and disturb such facile binaries of the liberal 'good gay' and the radical 'bad queer' by speaking to the complicated and often uneven relationships of exclusion and belonging, complicity and community."<sup>2</sup> They are, in effect, well aware of the main critique that could be levelled against such a collection – one that is bound up in critiquing homonormativity while rejecting complicity in the functioning of neoliberalism in Canada. The inherent value of this collection lies in its

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<sup>1</sup> Lenon and Dryden borrow heavily from Jasbir Puar's formulation of homonationalism in her 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* as a way to conceptually frame homonationalism in the Canadian context. Suzanne Lenon and OmiSoore H. Dryden, "Introduction: Interventions, Iterations, and Interrogations That Disturb the (Homo)Nation," in *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 5.

reflexive nature, as well as in its interjections on discourses surrounding Canadian nationhood, particularly in relation to the commonly held perception that Canada is a safe haven for LGBTQ individuals. As the editors note, Canada presents itself as a country which champions human rights, while simultaneously denying the foundation of the nation built upon white heteropatriarchy: “the idea of Canada as a safe haven is decidedly questionable, relying as it does both on the erasure of violences and on benevolent colonial practices.”<sup>3</sup> Most importantly, the editors steer clear of setting down the parameters of what constitutes queerness; rather, each of the essays is allowed to shape their own theorizations around queerness and how it functions in relation to homonationalism and settler-colonialism.

However, the volume isn't without its problems. *Disrupting Queer Inclusion* has a tendency to present Canada as a homogenous nation, rather than a confederation of various regional, linguistic, and political differences, in spite of the clear differences in geographical and social position in each essay. While the editors note that the pluralisation of homonationalism in the book's title is deliberate, stating that the “chapters collectively present a snapshot of these variegated formations of homonationalisms at different temporal and spatial sites,”<sup>4</sup> this intention is often made unclear as one proceeds through the book. *Disrupting Queer Inclusion* fails to address the ways in which homonationalisms can be seen as functioning differently in various parts of the country, as in, for example, provinces that have greater control over immigration and social policy like Québec. Apart from the short though excellent chapter on the Montreal-based Prisoner Correspondent Project by Marty Fink, the book glosses over the existence of Francophone Québec, reinforcing this volume as an analysis of Anglophone Canada, predominantly that west of the Ontario-Québec border, rather than a true examination of the country and all its disparate parts.

Further, the book's critique of white settler-colonial heteropatriarchy, its *raison d'être*, tends to place the *settler-colonial* aspect of this triad as an afterthought. A single

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 8.

chapter, "Pink Games on Stolen Land: Pride House and (Un)Queer Reterritorializations," addresses the complicity of queerness in colonialism and its impact indigenous rights under the guise of Pride House at the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympic Games. This is not to suggest that the volume should have made this dynamic its central focus—there are a number of other texts that exist, such as *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature*<sup>5</sup> (2011) that fill this gap. Perhaps this can be put down to a problem of framing: in attempting to tackle a country as large and diverse as Canada, the editors clearly had to make choices in what to include within the book. While the editors introduce homonationalism in the introduction and allow the various essays to pick up on its functioning on a political and social level, the lack of a concluding chapter makes the volume feel like a very slight incursion in the neoliberal structures that reify white heteropatriarchy as the default within Canadian society. If, in effect the activist tactics that are presented in a number of these essays are meant to effect a wholesale change in social relations across the country, the ways in which this can be brought into the larger political sphere, short of a social revolution, remain vague and murky. While one may be tempted to read this criticism as a very pessimistic reaction to the volume, it is precisely because of the various potentialities the authors see for a push-back against homonationalisms in Canada that makes the lack of directive all that more disappointing.

Despite these drawbacks, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion* presents a rich and diverse set of voices all drawing attention to the functioning of homonationalism and the reinforcement of white heteropatriarchy as underpinning the Canadian State. What I find most interesting is that the text itself remains a stark reminder of the long, dark Harper government years, where Canadian politics spoke out one side of its mouth, promoting the country as a safe place for LGBTQ immigrants, while simultaneously forcing them to integrate into a nation built upon white supremacy. As the editors note, "[t]he Conservative government's 2013 'Speech from the Throne' perpetuated this unwriting

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<sup>5</sup> See: Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, and Scott Lauria Morgensen, editors, *Queer Indigenous Studies: Interventions in Theory, Politics, and Literature* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011).

and disavowal of conquest, genocide, and slavery as foundational to the building of the nation,”<sup>6</sup> contributing to a wholesale rejection of any understanding of how Canada is the way it is. The recent change in government at the federal level may impact the editors’ arguments; with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s claims to work on a nation-to-nation dialogue with Canada’s First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, the social field they are critiquing is shifting (however so slightly) to the left. In effect, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* is more representative of how queerness has been regulated, and by extension become regulatory, under the auspices of the Harper Conservatives, than a sustained critique that can easily shift between political factions in Canadian federal politics. It would be interesting to revisit a number of the included topics in the years to come, particularly to question how far the Liberal Party of Canada’s “sunny ways” go towards correcting some of the structural violence that homonationalism inflicts on disparate communities in the country.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 10.

### **Works Cited**

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