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Between homonationalism and Islamophobia: comparing queer Caribbean and Muslim asylum seeking in/to the Netherlands

Keith E. McNeal and Sarah French Brennan

The turn of the twenty-first century in the Netherlands has witnessed a surge of xenophobic nationalism in relation to currents of migration from the former Dutch colonies and the néerlandophone Caribbean as well as from Turkey and Morocco. Dutch nationalists warn of the threat to national culture and its mythic tradition of liberalism – with gay liberation as the poster child – accompanied by especially prominent anxieties concerning Islam and Muslims. Reports concerning the ostensibly exceptional homophobia of Muslim communities have ignited moral panic over 'tolerating intolerance', a debate amplified by the dramatic increase in refugees and migrants to Europe in 2015. In a sociopolitical climate that has produced politicians such as Pim Fortuyn, who crusaded to end Muslim immigration to the country, and his more recent successor – Geert Wilders – who campaigned to ban the Qur'an and 'send Moroccans back', Islamophobia is a real political force. While many consider both politicians far-right extremists, their messages of moral panic concerning the 'Islamisation of the Netherlands' have nonetheless profoundly influenced national sentiment and shaped public discourse. Indeed, debates about multiculturalism, Islam and national identity have been particularly intense in the Netherlands (Bracke 2011).

As a growing number of analysts have observed, research is needed regarding the rise of *homonationalisms* correlated with increasing Islamophobia throughout the global North. This concerns not only conservative, far-right political parties and rhetoric but so-called liberals

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and progressives as well. As North Atlantic nation-states have come to embrace lesbigay rights as sacred commitments, they have also espoused intensified forms of Islamophobia – inverting the moral status of queer citizens by replacing the formerly abject homosexual Other-from-within with the newly ensconced Muslim Other-from-without. These corollary developments must be understood in terms of realignments within contemporary capitalism and the neoliberalisation of political culture, which drive the commodification and gentrified mainstreaming of certain aspects of queer culture along with fixation upon the circumscribed privileges of LGBT 'rights'. A further consequence of these interrelated developments has been the fetishisation of global Southern 'homophobia' as the homonationalist West's new Savage slot, which has necessitated Western disavowal of forms of homophobia from within (see Trouillot 2003 on the colonial genealogy of the 'Savage slot' in North Atlantic ideology).

Jasbir Puar (2013) defines 'homonationalism' as acceptance of lesbigay subjects as an index of both progress and national sovereignty, emphasising queer rights seen through the prism of legalisation and decriminalisation (also Duggan 2002). Homonationalism is institutional change that incorporates queer subjects into the nation-state through the legal recognition involved in overturning anti-sodomy laws, attaining gay marriage, obtaining queer adoption access and securing the right to serve openly in the military, among other developments, such as *harbouring queer refugees* and *granting them asylum*. As an assemblage, homonationalism is characterised by a host of developments that seek to 'normalise' lesbigay life by bringing it into the cultural mainstream, especially via the politics of representation and practices of consumption. And homonationalisms have also been increasingly working through Islamophobia in North Atlantic states and political cultures in complex and nefarious ways.

We take 'Islamophobia' to be an ideological assemblage involving overt and covert forms of discrimination against, denigration of, hostility to, and even violence towards Islam as a religion and Muslims as people. In this regard it can be considered a form of cultural racism that manifests in multifarious ways from housing and labour markets to political discourse and ideologies of citizenship. Debates rage concerning whether Islamophobia is akin to older forms of anti-Semitism in Europe (see Özyürek 2015, 8–13). Yet Matti Bunzl reminds us: '[W]hereas anti-Semitism was designed to protect the purity of the ethnic nation-state, Islamophobia is marshaled to safeguard the future of European civilization' (2005, 506). Centuries of European merchant and dignitary

accounts, as well as literary travel writing, show that as concepts of a culturally and geographically bound Europe began to develop, the 'Otherness' ascribed to Muslim nations created European identities as much as it said anything about countries in which the Muslim faith is practised (Said 1978; Scott 2007; Ewing 2008; Nussbaum 2012). The current monolithic construction of the Muslim as Europe's primary and negative Other emerged in the post-Cold War period and became ascendant with the West's post-9/11 War on Terror. Whereas an earlier state-based 'multiculturalist' paradigm in the United Kingdom, then in the Netherlands and later in Germany saw ethnic groups of migrant backgrounds as distinctive and separate, this began to change with the transgenerational development of non-white European minority populations (Chin 2017). Yet with post-industrial realignments in the capitalist world-system and the rise of neoliberal 'globalisation', discontents began brewing within European political space and 'migrants' became an easy scapegoat. Explicit anti-immigrant sentiment steadily gained ground among mainstream European politicians from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. The Muslim Other – seen as essentially patriarchal and conservative, therefore culturally backward and ostensibly outside the timespace of modernity – has also been constructed as inherently heterosexist and homophobic, pitting it against the ostensibly progressive values of European civilization that now equate women's and gay rights with democracy and freedom (Massad 2007; Butler 2008; Haritaworn, Tauqir & Erdem 2008; El-Tayeb 2011, 2012, 2013; Shakhsari 2014; Haritaworn 2015; De Genova 2017; Scott 2018).

As a methodological strategy for investigating the ways these tense twin dynamics of homonationalism and Islamophobia manifest beyond the formal political and mainstream public spheres in the Netherlands, we compare and contrast the experiences of queer and transgender refugees and asylum seekers from the anglophone Caribbean – a largely non-Muslim region – and from Muslim-majority Middle Eastern countries as well as queer Muslims from Uganda. We examine how homonationalism and Islamophobia become operationalised at the 'border' of an empirical nation-state. Immigration control serves gate-keeping functions related to entangled nationalist, state and capitalist projects, the meanings and limits of which are always conflicted and changing. As Luibhéid (2005, xviii) observes, 'Border zones and detention centers not only disrupt the presumed homology between territory, nation, and citizenship, but also highlight the structured exclusions, limits, and ongoing violence through which normative constructions of nation, citizenry, and citizenship are actively produced and contested.' Indeed, queer migration trajectories

are symptomatic of all the structural inequalities and political tensions they embody, traverse and negotiate (McNeal 2019). By considering asylum seeking as a modality of migration, our analysis reveals how the dialectics of homonationalism and Islamophobia play out within the border-and-migration apparatus of the world's great self-appointed national vanguard for gay liberation.

We do so in a relative statistical void. A study – 'Fleeing homophobia' (Jansen & Spijkerboer 2011) – reported that an average of approximately 200 persons applied for asylum in the Netherlands annually around that time citing fear of persecution in their home countries for their sexual orientation or gender identity. The report estimates that some 10,000 LGBT-related asylum applications were submitted in the European Union annually around the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. More recent estimates are difficult to come by. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights estimated the number of asylum seekers in the Netherlands in 2016 with claims linked to sexual orientation and gender identity to be between one hundred and one thousand (EUFRA 2017). The source of those numbers herself told us that the report only serves to 'demonstrate the lack of reliable data' (Sabine Jansen, personal communication, 2017). In any case, immigration and customs statistics nonetheless suggest that successful *acceptance* rates for asylum seekers – for all reasons – in the Netherlands steadily rose from 40 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent at the height of the European refugee crisis in 2015, then tapered back down to 54 per cent the following year (IND 2016). We see these trends as symptomatic of the onset of a Fortress Europe mentality more generally, inflected by Dutch tendencies. The lack of robust statistical information heightens the significance of ethnographic methods and materials.

We first consider the genealogy of contemporary Dutch political culture and the emergence of the Netherlands as a paradigmatic case of homonationalism. This sets the scene for our comparative examination of queer Caribbean and Muslim asylum seeking in the Netherlands, allowing us to examine differential operations of racism and racialisation within the border-and-migration regime as well as the ways being Muslim and the national politics of Islam play out in the experiences of queer and trans asylum seekers. In conclusion, we consider the comparative results of our investigation in relation to more recent developments in the Netherlands and Europe more broadly.

Among the populations considered here are individuals who are racialised in the Dutch context in varied and intersectional ways. Because the concept of biological race is so closely tied to the Holocaust

in the post-war Dutch imagination, any allusion to race is strongly taboo, and anti-racism has become orthodoxy in Dutch legislation. Yet despite the 'powerful narrative of Europe as a colorblind continent, largely untouched by the devastating ideology it exported all over the world' (El-Tayeb 2011, xv), as well as specifically Dutch efforts to project anti-racism as a national characteristic in the long shadow of World War II (Wekker 2016; Siebers 2017), colourism and racialisation are inextricable from the politics and experience of asylum. Whereas colour and biology are avoided in public discourse, yet tacitly at work, as our interlocutors attest, references to culture, religion and nationality have become potent signifiers of threat, unassimilability and Otherness – what some analysts refer to as the shift from biological to cultural racism.

A note on terminology: at the time of our studies (2014–18), 'LGBT' and sometimes 'LGBTI' (in Dutch, *LHBTI: lesbienne, homoseksueel, biseksueel, trans, intersex*) were the relevant legal categories for asylum seekers. The literature on queer and trans migration and asylum seeking also often employs the acronym SOGI, which refers to sexual orientation and gender identity. We use 'queer' here as a catch-all term at times for the sake of discussion; however, we are entirely mindful of complex and nuanced distinctions and differences related to sexual orientation and gender identity, especially between cisgender LGB and transgender forms of experience, as we also indicate along the way. Of course, questions of terms, labels and identifying oneself are culturally fraught and contextual. It was not uncommon for some individuals to use various terms at different moments to describe or refer to themselves, whereas others felt strongly associated with specific terms and did not deviate from those designations.

Homonationalism and Islamophobia in the Netherlands

The Netherlands is the archetypal case of homonationalism. It was the first country in the world to erect a monument to homosexual victims of the Holocaust, in 1987, and the first to legalise same-sex marriage in 2001, a year after legalising sex work (Hekma & Duyvendak 2011). Amsterdam is widely seen as the world's gay capital, 'exemplifying the neoliberal creative city with its mixture of quaint architecture and edgy metrosexual culture, idyllic canals and multicultural markets, liberal drug and prostitution laws' (El-Tayeb 2011, 128). Central to the national imagination is the concept of 'tolerance', born of pragmatism in relation to the sociohistorical dynamics of very different earlier times. Yet this

earlier 'pillar' system had collapsed by the end of the 1960s because of the sexual revolution, student revolt, the rise of the baby boomers and the promise of a liberal-bourgeois consumerist utopia. Thus the Dutch tradition of tolerance based on ecumenical non-interference morphed into one emphasising secular equality premised upon liberty of choice in consumption as the ideological basis for Dutch unity (van der Veer 2006, 118–24). But this ship began running aground in the late 1990s, and a new kind of populism, with xenophobic tendencies, emerged as difficulties in dealing with globalisation and immigration increased. Attacking conservative migrants and Muslims as signs of rejection of sexual liberty and consumerism became an assertion of a retrenched Dutch identity.

The emergence of Pim Fortuyn onto the political scene was the harbinger of this new dispensation. Throughout his 2002 campaign, the former-leftist-sociology-professor-turned-rightwing-journalist harped on the difference between the 'modern' Netherlands and the culturally 'backward' countries from which many migrants to the country originate. He touted his ability to be an out gay politician as evidence of enlightened Dutch tolerance. Fortuyn told the *Volkskrant* newspaper: 'In what country could an electoral leader of such a large movement as mine be openly homosexual? How wonderful that that's possible. That's something one can be proud of. And I'd like to keep it that way, thank you very much' (Poorthuis & Wansink 2002). Fortuyn targeted Muslims in particular, railing against Islam as a 'hostile religion' and a 'backward culture'. His 1997 book *Against the Islamisation of Our Culture* advocated banning Muslims from entering the country. He intentionally provoked conservative imams, 'because each time they responded with some diatribe about unnatural behavior and Western decadence, his supposed progressiveness only gained' (Lesage & Asselberghs 2002). Before he was assassinated by a fellow Dutchman just six days before the national elections in May 2005, it was widely speculated that Fortuyn might well have ended up becoming the next Dutch prime minister. In an impressive posthumous debut, his newly leaderless party – Lijst Pim Fortuyn – nonetheless won an unprecedented 26 out of 150 seats in Parliament.

A rowdy new type of iconoclast, Fortuyn personified an emerging pro-gay, yet neoconservative populist, zeitgeist in spectacular form. Lesage and Asselberghs observe: 'Queer though he was, his ideas were square. His tough stance and simplistic solutions ensured that his mainly heterosexual constituents gladly forgave him his homosexual coquetry. His straight followers tended to overlook the fact that "their Pim" was gay. They didn't care: he gave voice to what they felt.' Fortuyn enabled the Netherlands to forthrightly homonationalise, embodying

the transition to a sexualised – rather than asexual – sexual politics in an era of hyper-mediatisation and the commercialisation of citizenship. He was notoriously vulgar, publicly declaring his fondness for rimming and salaciously flaunting his love of young boys, once even infamously stating that he wanted the right to 'fuck young Moroccan boys without having to deal with their backward imams' (cited in van der Veer 2006, 120). Paradoxically, this vulgarity allowed him to pre-empt any potential scandal and offered resolution to the newly emergent dilemma of reconciling political power with an explicitly gay sexual life.

Indeed, Fortuyn 'understood like no other media celebrity that giving explicit details on his sexual activities would allow him to make his far bolder, blatantly racist and nonsexually intolerant statements unhindered' (Lesage & Asselberghs 2002). He linked openness about homosexuality in politics with neoconservative ethno-nationalist recourse to racism and xenophobia: 'In the eyes of many an uneasy and concerned voter, the unabashed homosexual may well look like a tower of strength. Someone who dares to make an autonomous decision about his or her sexual identity – especially one so clearly unconventional – and manages to stay in control over the private sphere that is the body surely must stand out like a rock in a society that is subject to such rapid and radical change it practically seems adrift' (Lesage & Asselberghs 2002). And his position on Islam, Muslims and migration was crystal clear. Sexuality should not be controlled but Dutch identity most certainly should. Gays can do what they want but outsiders must assimilate. Society cannot tolerate 'intolerance'.

Since Fortuyn's assassination in 2002, homosexuality has had 'an unprecedented centrality to Dutch politics' (Dudink 2017, 3) and has become more deeply entangled with Islam in public discourse, with further entrenchment of the notion that Muslims are unassimilable into Dutch culture. His death left a void in politics, and, while his party saw a huge win in the election just after his funeral, it had disbanded by 2006. Into the void stepped Geert Wilders, less bombastic than his predecessor, yet even more zealous in his campaign against Muslims. His apocalyptic warnings of the Islamisation of the country, calls for banning the Qur'an and declarations that Muslim migration means 'the end of European and Dutch civilization as we know it' (quoted in de Leeuw & van Wichelen 2014, 145) garnered international attention. For years, he has argued for a ban on immigration from Muslim countries, and his public remarks are so vitriolic that lawsuits have been brought against him for hate speech. In 2011 Wilders was found not guilty of inciting discrimination against and hatred of Moroccans and acquitted of all charges, although

the presiding judge observed that his comments were on the 'edge' of acceptability. Wilders came under legal fire again for a 2014 speech railing against Muslims. Ironically, his defence centred on freedom of speech, although one of his most famous platforms is a book ban on the Qur'an. In December 2016, Wilders was finally convicted of inciting discrimination against Moroccans; yet the conviction came with no penalty (Darroch 2016).

In 2008, meanwhile, the populist politician Rita Verdonk – having recently founded her own short-lived party, Proud of the Netherlands (*Trots op Nederland*), after splitting from the liberal rightist VVD – opined that 'Dutch people simply do not have it in them to discriminate! We have been a hospitable people for centuries' (quoted in Balkenhol 2016, 278). However, echoing a sentiment that has become dispersed throughout the political spectrum, she continued by declaring: 'Enough! There are limits.' Those limits and the qualifications for inclusion are questions of great contention and enormous consequence. During Verdonk's tenure as Minister for Integration and Immigration in the 2000s, the government introduced a new immigration exam including questions about views on lesbians and gays and displaying an image of two men kissing. The addition of this component of the exam was prompted by concerns about allowing conservative Muslims to migrate into the country, effectively making lesbigay rights part of the litmus test for Dutch citizenship (Hekma & Duyvendak 2011, 626–7). Being Dutch meant being pro-gay. Never mind the fact that 42 per cent of Dutch natives interviewed around the same time reported disliking seeing two men kissing in the street (Keuzenkamp et al. 2006, 36). Indeed, a study of homophobia in the Netherlands (Keuzenkamp & Kuyper 2013) suggests that Dutch social acceptance of queers lags behind state recognition of legal equality and that lesbigay Dutch norms are overwhelmingly cisgender (also see Hekma & Duyvendak 2011). Buijs, Hekma and Duyvendak (2011) identify gender conservatism underlying patterns of anti-gay violence in the Netherlands among perpetrators who otherwise espouse the prevailing gay-tolerant rhetoric. It is additionally revealing that certain groups are exempted from taking the immigration gay litmus test: EU nationals, asylum seekers, skilled workers who make more than €45,000 per year, and citizens of the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan and Switzerland, 'where presumably homophobia is not to be found or where, rather, importing impressive income levels clearly preempts concerns over importing homophobia' (Butler 2008, 4).

In the wake of vociferous anti-refugee rallies throughout the country, accompanying rancorous public debate about resettlement,

and demands by Wilders that Muslim men should be incarcerated, the ruling against him in late 2016 for inciting discrimination against Muslims came three months before a general election. Wilders vowed to put migration and 'Islamisation' at the heart of his campaign, pledging to close every mosque in the Netherlands and ban the Qur'an from public buildings. On the heels of Trump's election in the USA, opinion polls put his PVV in front with 24 per cent of the vote, ahead of his nearest rival, the Liberals (VVD), led by the prime minister, Mark Rutte. The latter decried Wilders's remarks, yet had himself promised, in 2011, to 'return this beautiful land to the Dutch, because that is our project', trafficking in political discourse that framed 2nd-, 3rd- and even 4th-generation non-white Dutch as 'migrants' and 'allochthons' (El-Tayeb 2011; Wekker 2016). Rutte's VVD won in 2017 but lost parliamentary seats. Political commentators noted that Rutte benefited from his recent hardline stance in a diplomatic standoff: he refused to allow two Turkish government ministers to address rallies in Rotterdam about a referendum expanding President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's powers. Wilders's PVV came in second place, gaining 12 parliamentary seats.

The 2018 municipal elections saw the emergence of yet another new nationalist party – the Forum for Democracy (FVD), led by Thierry Baudet, which touts native Dutch cultural superiority and denounces the European Union – that suggests a splintering within the country's far right. The party competed only in Amsterdam, traditionally a liberal bulwark, where it gained 4.9 per cent of the vote, and national polls placed it as the third most popular party in the Netherlands. Baudet is an avowed admirer of Trump who espouses explicitly sexist and racist views, claiming that the Dutch are being 'diluted' by 'mixing' with people from all over the world. His party has drawn adherents from the PVV, which polled seventh in the nation despite having the second-largest representation in Parliament. The PVV launched a high-profile ad campaign claiming that 'Islam is Discrimination' in bold red block letters flashing on the television screen accompanied by a booming musical score, then by an ominous drumbeat soundtrack. 'Discrimination' was sequentially switched to 'Violence', then 'Terror', then 'Jewish Hate', ending on 'Christian Hate' (Egherman 2018). The VVD retained primacy in the municipal elections, with Rutte campaigning against preferential housing treatment for refugees and asylees (Sterling 2018). Then, in the 2019 elections, Baudet's FVD gained a significant number of parliamentary seats, tying with Prime Minister Rutte's VVD as one of the country's two largest parties. Wilders's PVV lost seats because many of its supporters realigned with the ascendant FVD.

Seeking queer asylum in the Netherlands

When someone seeks SOGI-based asylum in the Netherlands, their official journey usually begins at one of two places. If arriving and claiming asylum at Amsterdam's international airport, they are likely to begin processing at the Schiphol centre. However, most people apply for asylum at the immigration reception centre at Ter Apel in the north-east Netherlands, just across the border from north-west Germany. There they will be registered, have their identities verified and undergo a health screening. According to the Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers (COA), the organisation charged with reception of asylum seekers, this facility is meant for short-term stays of a maximum four days, but we have found that some people stay for weeks. Next they are moved to a 'process reception location' for what is supposed to be no more than 12 days, and then to an Asielzoekerscentrum (asylum seekers' centre, AZC) – commonly known as 'camps' – until the resolution of their case. During this time they will be interviewed by asylum officials, have access to a lawyer and be provided with healthcare, housing and a small stipend. Conditions in residential asylum centres vary considerably and placement seems to be somewhat luck-of-the-draw. An asylum seeker may share a room with several others or have a room of their own; some centres provide all meals; others have individual or shared kitchen facilities and grocery stipends; some are located in the outskirts of cities, whereas others are more rural or remote and difficult to access by public transport. In some cases, lesbians, gay men and transgender people are housed together on the assumption that they will get along better, although this is not always the case, especially when those involved hail from different countries and backgrounds, as a number of our interlocutors attest.

Because the asylum process requires that a judge in the Netherlands determines whether an asylum seeker is credible in their assertion that they are (1) eligibly LGBT and (2) justifiably fearful of persecution in their home country, there is an embedded assumption not only of the universality of the sexual categories and the experience of persecution but that both are readily recognisable and understandable by many judges. 'Country reports' compiled by various NGOs and other sources may be available for use by these judges to assess the credibility of an asylum seeker's story against the known circumstances in their home country. However, how these reports are used seems to vary widely. While some judges inform themselves about the cultural diversity of sexual expression and understandings throughout the world, others use the report to

add colour to existing stereotypes or neglect the content of the reports altogether. The reports may themselves be partial or problematical concerning social conditions in asylum seekers' countries of origin, and their use – and abuse – as 'expert' documents within the legal bureaucratic matrix often extends well beyond the meanings and intentions of their authors (Murray 2017; McNeal 2019).

There have been various cases across Europe – including in the Netherlands – in which an asylum claim is denied because the applicant's appearance and story do not fit stereotypes of what an LGBT individual is assumed to look like, act like, know about and experience in their home country. Others have been denied because the applicants were not familiar with the laws on homosexual behaviour or with the gay and lesbian bars in their countries of origin. Applicants who are married to a person of another sex or who have children have also been denied because they do not fit conventional notions of being queer or trans. These examples demonstrate that not only stereotypes about LGBT individuals but also preconceptions about the home countries and cultural backgrounds of the applicants are used in adjudicating these cases. (In this chapter, we do *not* address complex questions of 'homophobia' and SOGI liveability in countries of origin, issues which deserve their own full attention and interrogation and which of course vary considerably from country to country.)

From the Caribbean

The majority of queer and transgender refugees from the anglophone Caribbean who come to the Netherlands hail from Jamaica and the twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (TT), two of the largest nation-states in the region in which homosexuality has been against the law, although a legal challenge in 2018 overturned TT's anti-sodomy legislation and is now under appeal by the government. McNeal's research in the Netherlands has focused upon asylees from TT, yet everything he has learned about Jamaicans migrating there under similar circumstances suggests strong parallels with the portrait painted of Trinbagonians. The Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (IND) does not release statistics based on SOGI asylum claims, but, since most people seeking asylum from the anglophone Caribbean do so on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, the total number of first-time asylum applications from these countries (IND 2018a) gives us some sense of the number of queer and trans asylum seekers entering the country. The number of Trinbagonian asylum applicants has steadily increased, from

nine in 2015 to 22 in 2016 and to 34 in 2017, whereas Jamaican application rates have decreased, from 68 in 2015 to 34 in 2016 and to 14 in 2017, for reasons we discuss below regarding the 2016 reclassification of Jamaica as a 'safe' country of origin.

Indeed, until recently, the trajectories and success rates of anglophone Caribbean asylum seeking based on sexuality or gender expression largely confirms a robust view of homonationalist Dutch commitments, with most claimants either receiving asylum on the basis of their initial application or, if initially rejected, by successfully navigating the appeal process. The problem of Islamophobia is largely kept in abeyance in this context, given that most queer and trans Caribbeans seeking asylum in the Netherlands are *not* Muslim, and those few that are (usually of South Asian descent) are not especially pious, and the fact that they come from a regional background not coded as Muslim substantially recontextualises whatever residual religious identity they may carry. These circumstances enable queer anglophone Caribbeans to sidestep the most egregious manifestations of Dutch xenophobia within the refugee and asylum system. Paradoxically, these asylum seekers benefit rhetorically from another form of racialised imagery: the dominant global stereotype of the Caribbean – and Jamaica in particular – as virulently 'homophobic' societies from which one would naturally flee in search of freedom. The Dutch state may therefore function ideologically as the benevolent homonationalist patron, saving queer Caribbeans from their own 'backward' societies without adding any more 'problematic' Muslims into the national mix.

This dynamic is exemplified in an online publication by the IND (2018b) featuring a testimonial by a 37-year-old gay man from Tobago, with the emboldened headline, 'The Netherlands equals freedom to me'. The accompanying subheadline explains: 'As a gay man from Trinidad and Tobago, Jason Williams had to keep his nature secret for years. Now he can talk freely: "I want a life without fear, because fear is always present in my country."' Williams travelled to the Netherlands via Curaçao in 2016, applying for asylum immediately upon arrival at Schiphol. The first full quotation from him focuses on his engagement with Dutch immigration officials at the airport: 'I was anxious and insecure and walked to the Marechaussee. An official asked kindly what he could do for me. I told him while crying that I wanted to apply for asylum because I am gay and fear for my life. The man tried to put me at ease and said "we will take care of you". That felt so warm and welcoming to me, it was as if a load fell from my shoulders.' Williams is next quoted reporting the hostility and maltreatment he faced at home in TT: 'I was constantly afraid to

be open about my sexual preference. Gay men are regularly maltreated, threatened and even killed. I too have been attacked, because although I didn't tell anything myself, apparently people react to my behaviour and draw their conclusions from it. I was so terribly afraid of my life and what the future would bring me.' Regarding his questioning by asylum agents, 'My contact with the IND went well. The IND official also tried to put me at ease.' He continues by briefly commenting upon his time in a refugee camp in the small southern Dutch town of Baexem, where he notes experiencing 'a cultural shock' in the midst of so many different people from all over the world, and even notes how he had to remain closeted there in order to protect himself, only able to be fully himself while out of the camp attending gay parties in the glitzy city of Eindhoven. But his time in the camp passed more or less uneventfully and he was eventually placed in housing in the small nearby town of Brunssum after being granted asylum. 'The Netherlands equals freedom for me; you can live your life as you wish,' he observes. Aspiring to master the Dutch language, move to a larger city and find proper work, Williams concludes: 'I have now reached a point where I feel comfortable. My life has started again, I feel really reborn.'

Something specific about the Trinbagonian asylum scene in the Netherlands is that a relatively high proportion of the asylees are transgender, the rest consisting of gay men alongside a few lesbians. Intensified patterns of transgender refugeeism seem to be the result of cumulative network migration developing in the wake of the first three trans Trinbagonian asylum migrations in 2011, combined with the push effects of newly emergent patterns of Western-style homonormativity among queer Trinbagonians at home. This latter dynamic is not only due to intergenerational change in line with late modern patterns of postcolonial globalisation and the circulation of global Northern homonationalist media and politics, but also hedged in by an intensifying international political economy of homophobia promulgated by North American evangelicals on a global mission to 'defend family values'. These transformations have created a pressure towards a certain sort of lesbigay respectability and 'normalisation' that leaves less room for the full spectrum of queer expression – and especially for transgender liveability – in TT. The local battle against homophobia has therefore tended to seek its gains at the expense of trans people, leaving transgender Trinbagonians in the lurch (see McNeal 2020).

Overall, anglophone Caribbean acceptance rates for Dutch asylum based on sexual orientation and gender identity are high compared with those of the United Kingdom, where they are strikingly low (see McNeal

2019). Every Trinbagonian asylee McNeal has spoken with has attested that they are able to live more openly regarding their sexuality or gender in the Netherlands, but were shocked to discover how racist Dutch people can be. 'I never thought I'd come here to finally be myself and have to deal with the colour of my skin!' one trans woman complained. In this regard, queer and trans Caribbean asylees perceive both openings for and limits to their 'integration' into Dutch culture. They are confronted not only by the legacies of colonial racism but also by contemporary xenophobic nationalism. Yet their relationship to this early twenty-first-century ethno-nationalist ideology is complex, ambivalent and paradoxical as non-Muslims. Indeed some – but certainly not all – have come to evince forms of Islamophobia in their attitudes towards the Muslim migrants they are exposed to or interact with in the refugee camps as well as in Dutch society more generally, sentiments they may post and comment about on social media platforms. We interpret this as a painfully poignant index of their ultimate structural inability as non-white would-be citizens to fully 'integrate' into the national body politic. This interpretation is akin to Aihwa Ong's (2003) findings concerning Cambodian refugees in the USA learning their place in the racial order through interpellation by national structures of governmentality. In other words, they are ready to critique and push back against the colonial legacy of colour-based racism on the basis of their experiences as non-white queer migrants, but nonetheless also imbibe forms of Islamophobia circulating in homonationalist political culture.

This brings us to the question of queer asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries of origin and from Uganda, which is not Muslim-majority, but has a sizeable Islamic population, from which a number of queer refugees hail.

From the Muslim Middle East and Africa

Muslim LGBT asylum seekers come to the Netherlands from a wide swathe of the globe, primarily North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, although Brennan's informants are largely Iraqi, Iranian, Syrian and Ugandan. Only one person in the study was trans and she is Moroccan. Men who identified themselves as gay predominated among asylum seekers from the Middle East but the Ugandan group was somewhat less starkly split between queer men and women in this study's population. Differences in mobility, financial resources and family responsibilities between men and women may account for some of this sexed disparity. As a young Egyptian man put it, if parents find out a child is queer, 'gay men are kicked out of the house; lesbian women are locked in'.

It may be that there are also stronger pull factors for men than for women: globalised images of 'authentic' gay male lifestyles are much more social, urban and linked to specific kinds of communal spaces. The image of gay bars in Western cities has become a potent symbol as a central space in gay life. Manalansan (2003) argues that the gay bar has come to be seen as a universal 'home' to gay men everywhere, limited though it may be as a largely privileged, white gay male space. As one gay Syrian asylum seeker voiced it, 'Look at me! Before, I never, never go to a bar in my life in Syria. Not possible. Now, I can go, and I can meet friends, I can dance there. I feel home.' Of course, economic, cultural and ethnoracial barriers make this image of the gay bar as home available only to some. Still, for queers imagining their options when confronted by fear and threat in home communities, some men may have a sharper image in their minds of a new 'home' to which they can flee, making it a more thinkable terminus. Social networking and dating websites, very popular among young migrants, also provide a conduit for network migration, as is also the case among Caribbeans.

Many echoed Caribbean asylee sentiments about feeling freer in terms of their sexuality and gender expression in the Netherlands. But most experienced a dramatic contrast with their Caribbean counterparts when it came to their religious backgrounds and identity, feeling that they must hide their religious beliefs from authorities to varying degrees. Almost all were asked in asylum interviews about their religion. For many, questions to the effect of 'How can you be both gay and Muslim?' left asylum seekers with the sense that they must disavow their faith or face deportation. A young Iraqi man who had received asylum several years earlier recounted that he had felt that even his attorney did not believe that he could both 'really be gay' and 'really be Muslim'. His friend chimed in: 'The Dutch, they don't understand this. It's like an impossible thing', to which the Iraqi man responded, 'Understand what? I just *am*!' A Ugandan woman who did not want to disclose her legal status said several times that she thought asylum officials were 'very suspicious' of any queer person who was a practising Muslim. Several other queer Muslim asylum seekers stated that they felt targeted and that they did not believe asylum seekers of other religions would be asked such leading questions, or about their religions at all.

Not everyone had this view of asylum officials and procedures, however. Others reported feeling that their religious beliefs were 'respected', in part because Muslim prayer schedules and dietary restrictions were honoured, and because questions about religion in interview sessions were perceived as understandable and 'normal', rather than intrusive or

hostile. Reports of treatment at the residential asylum centres and in the surrounding communities were similarly varied but, particularly in more rural areas, asylum seekers have had some trouble with local residents. One woman reported that in a grocery store another shopper asked her about her headscarf in a way that was 'not friendly', which made her feel unsafe and hypervisible afterwards. More commonly, asylum seekers said they 'got looks' from locals or were ignored altogether.

Middle Eastern and North African asylum seekers were especially aware of debates in the Netherlands about refugees. A Syrian man who was proud of how much Dutch he had managed to teach himself, mostly by watching TV and reading the newspapers that were offered at his asylum centre, described the anxiety of feeling unwanted and recounted a 'crazy' moment in which he was trying to read a newspaper article – in Dutch – about how Syrian refugees do not want to integrate and learn Dutch. While many – perhaps conscious of their precarious legal and social position in the country – preferred not to comment on it, others expressed some resentment that measures they had taken to stay alive appeared to be such an imposition in this host country. 'I don't want to be here either!' declared one young man. 'Of course I prefer to be in my country, but I cannot.' This position is all the more poignant in the light of the legacies of European colonialism in the Middle East and Africa and the wars and military interventions of recent decades.

Asylum seekers are often clustered according to nationality and language in Dutch refugee camps, and queer asylum seekers – more of whom arrive alone than non-queer asylum seekers – frequently find themselves housed with people they fear share the homophobia they have fled from. Several incidences of harassment and aggression against queer asylum seekers living in the camps have been reported, resulting in the establishment in Amsterdam in 2016 of a residential centre specifically for queer asylum seekers. However, most queer asylum seekers are not able to live in this centre because of its limited capacity, and many find themselves afraid to be open about their sexualities or associate with other queer asylum seekers. As a result, these individuals do not always form the social networks that connect them with queer organisations in the Netherlands, which may have a detrimental effect on their asylum applications, since demonstrating participation in gay life since arriving in the Netherlands may be useful in establishing credibility as queer in an asylum claim. Queer Muslims are not the only SOGI asylum seekers targeted with the aggression referred to above, but several interviewed by Brennan reported incidents of harassment, and the majority of media reports on this topic discussed violence against Muslim or Middle Eastern queer asylum seekers.

Seeking asylum between homonationalism and Islamophobia in Fortress Europe

While it is more difficult to ascertain success rates among Muslim asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa than among those from the Caribbean, given the demographics and the number of countries involved, our overall impression is that the Netherlands border-and-migration system is in fact generally predisposed to grant asylum to queer and transgender applicants – or at least was until very recently. These trends reflect strong Dutch homonationalist commitments, as compared with the United Kingdom, where queer asylum acceptance rates are quite low despite homonationalist pronouncements to the contrary (McNeal 2019). In this regard, we must appreciate that the Netherlands is willing to extend the benefits and privileges of full LGBT rights not only to its native citizens but also to *some* queers seeking asylum from around the world. Indeed, 'saving' LGBT Caribbeans from their own 'homophobic' societies ideologically bolsters Dutch homonationalist identity.

Yet things are less straightforward when it comes to queer Muslim asylum seeking precisely because of the Islamophobia factor. On the one hand, the dynamic is similar, ostensibly saving non-white people from their own 'backward' societies; yet on the other hand, queer Muslims from the Middle East and North Africa must navigate the realities of Dutch Islamophobia within the migration system, the refugee camps and society at large. They realise that they must often distance themselves from their religious backgrounds and commitments in the midst of the asylum assessment process in order to make it through. In other words, queer Muslims must often relocate from the sexual to the religious closet.

Seen in a different light, however, granting queer Muslim asylum may be a type of exception to the anxiety over Muslim migration that has panicked Europe for decades. In a speech railing against 'the rising tide of Islam' and calling for the halt of migration to the Netherlands, for example, Wilders mentions homosexuals being jailed and threatened in Iran and stipulates that, 'when it comes to asylum-seekers, it's a different story' (quoted in Dowling 2013). Queer Muslims become tolerable because they are seen as subverting Islam, a religion that has been stamped exceptionally and uniquely homophobic in the public imagination. What is seen as exceptionalism within their faith makes them desirable members of the nation. They also work as an ideological buffer against accusations of racism, as their admission seems to say: *We're not Islamophobic – look at these queer Muslims we saved from their culture.* Moreover, queer refugees do not evoke the spectre of hyperfertility linked

to the 'demographic threat' that has figured so prominently in discourses concerning Muslims in Europe.

In addition to the patterns and dynamics we outline here, however, there is a larger problem now materialising in a time-released fashion in response to the increase in numbers of asylum seekers in Europe that climaxed in 2015. While spikes in the numbers of asylum seekers have been seen periodically since the concept of asylum was codified in 1951, the apocryphal language and imagery – largely Islamophobic and xeno-phobic – employed by mainstream politicians and media in the mid-2010s has resulted from a 'perfect storm' of social, economic and political currents dating back to the 1970s (Lucassen 2018), which catalyses an intensified Fortress Europe mentality across the continent (De Genova 2017). These developments have brought about loud and rancorous debate and discourse about national identity, immigration and security, especially in the Netherlands, as discussed above. We noted earlier that the overall asylum acceptance rates in the Netherlands rose steadily during the first half of the second decade of the twenty-first century, from 40 per cent in 2010 to 70 per cent in 2015, falling back to 54 per cent in 2016. If this pattern indicates a trend, and we increasingly believe, on the basis of what we have been seeing and hearing anecdotally since 2017, that it does, then one should not be surprised to witness continued falling rates of asylum acceptance in the coming years, with consequences for queer and trans asylum seeking.

Indeed, it is telling that Jamaica was reclassified as a 'safe' country of origin by the Netherlands in 2016, although an exceptional clause was retained in the policy regarding LGBT asylum seekers from there (AIDA 2016). Yet as we noted above, most asylum seeking from Jamaica is based on SOGI claims, and the number of asylum applications made in the Netherlands by Jamaicans dipped precipitously in the wake of Jamaica's reclassification. Therefore the possibility of future queer asylum seeking from the Caribbean nation seen by many as the most homophobic in the region has, to all intents and purposes, been undermined. And closing down the possibility of queer asylum seeking from the country that has generated the highest percentage of queer and trans anglophone Caribbean asylees effectively decreases the overall rate of asylum seeking from the region more generally. Moreover, TT was also reclassified as a safe country of origin in 2017, with a similar clause noting that LGBT claimants may still be considered (AIDA 2017). And there is every reason to expect that what happened with Jamaica will happen with TT as well, especially since it is not as infamous as Jamaica for its homophobia (and the eventual resolution of TT's 2018 High Court case will definitively

reset the rules of the game). In fact reports from Trinbagonian asylees in the Netherlands claim exactly this to be the case. These developments are difficult to decipher except in the light of the border tightening associated with Fortress Europe. Indeed, a range of activists, advocacy organisations, lawyers, and asylum seekers themselves, have reported that overall rejections of queer asylum applications are on the rise, so much so that a formal protest regarding the matter was held outside the Dutch Parliament in October 2017 (Rainey 2017).

Because of their differently positioned backgrounds, queer and transgender asylum seekers from different countries of origin encounter and navigate different patterns of experience in the Netherlands, some-where between homonationalism and Islamophobia, whose logics play out in perversely intertwined ways. Indeed our findings corroborate a view of Dutch nationalism and political culture as characterised by the twin dynamics of homonationalism and Islamophobia operationalised within the border-and-migration apparatus. Yet we also see evidence of change, complexity, slippage and contradiction. For example, an intensifying preoccupation with 'credibility' and the problem of 'fraud' suggests that denying queer asylum claims on the basis of lack of cred-ibility enables Dutch officials to maintain an ideological commitment to homonationalism while cutting back on the number of queer migrants granted asylum and eventually citizenship.

Another important sign of possible change concerns the experience of a gay Trinbagonian man who entered the Netherlands in June 2017 and was asked, several weeks into his time in the refugee camp, to 'tone it down' regarding his gayness and to take his rainbow flag down from his bedroom door in order to respect fellow Muslims in the camp. This was a distressing experience for him and served only to fuel both anti-Muslim sentiment and a criticism of repressive camp authorities. He could not believe that this would be possible in the land of gay liberation. This is but one anecdote, of course, yet it does not embody any simplistic char-acterisation of the immigration system as militantly homonationalist and unremittingly Islamophobic. Perhaps an emerging national conscious-ness about overreach in expressions of Dutch Islamophobia – exemplified by the symbolic censure of Geert Wilders – may be fostering an ever so slight, yet significant, rethinking of Islamophobic attitudes.

We would like to close our discussion with a final anecdotal note. At the time of writing (2019), two of the 14 transgender Trinbagonian women asylees in the Netherlands have Afghani boyfriends, whom they met in their respective refugee camps. In many regards, the two couples have very different experiences from one another but, taken together,

we see them as representing new vectors of convergent queer globalisation as well as accentuating the significance of viewing the immigration-and-asylum system as a microcosm of Dutch globalisation more generally – indeed *central*, rather than marginal, to twenty-first-century Dutch society. These relationships are a poignant counterpoint to other queer Caribbean asylees mentioned earlier who have begun espousing Islamophobic attitudes as a result of their partial assimilation to Dutch society and political culture. Thus while our comparative analysis of queer asylum seeking corroborates a view of the perversely twinned significance of homonationalism and Islamophobia as operationalised within the Dutch border-and-migration system, we want to conclude by highlighting signs of change and contradiction as well as unintended social consequences emerging from below.

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