

# The Gay-Friendly Games: Homonationalism and the Olympics

By Julianna Duholke

**ABSTRACT.** The Olympics, being an international event, have often sparked a number of political and human rights debates. Frequently, countries use the international competition to take a stand on a variety of global issues, at times going as far as to boycott the Olympics. The most recent human rights debate that has entered the Olympic sphere has been centered on LGBTQ rights. An initial look at the media coverage of both the 2012 London and 2014 Sochi Games would suggest that London took the opportunity of being the host city to promote LGBTQ rights, whereas Sochi further oppressed and marginalized the queer community. However, this paper finds that both Olympics were equally problematic for queer folk, as the Western media promoted homonationalist and normalizing discourses throughout both Games. This narrative made space for the white, gender-conforming male at the expense of the queer and trans community, as well as people of color.

## Introduction

The Olympics have been lauded as rallying points for human rights and have frequently been a venue for activists. Citizens, politicians, and lawyers alike see no better time than at a mega-international sporting event to apply pressure on countries that fail to recognize human rights. In recent years, the Olympics' mobilizing nature has appeared to facilitate more space, both figuratively and literally, for LGBT athletes and their rights. However, the international nature of the Games has also led to normalizing discourses and problematic discussions in the media. This can be seen in dialogue at both the Summer

2012 Olympics in London, England, and the Winter 2014 Olympics in Sochi, Russia. These cases, which are the two most recent Olympic Games, were selected for analysis given the dichotomy of the media's coverage between a liberal, democratic country versus a non-democratic/non-Western country. London was praised for its "gay-friendly" marketing campaign, which revolved around the idealization of the white consumerist gay male. By contrast, the media's critique of Sochi's anti-gay laws relied on the promotion of certain sexual behaviors and the exclusion of non-normative ones. Rather than act as an avenue for oppressed voices and for the promotion of LGBTQ rights, media coverage of the Olympic Games has further marginalized queer people through the prioritization of privileged gay voices.

### **Theoretical Framework: Homonationalism**

The exclusion of queer peoples at the Olympics is best understood through Jasbir Puar's theory of homonationalism. Homonationalism is the "national recognition and inclusion [of gays] contingent on the segregation and disqualification of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary" (Puar, 2005, p. 2). This paper extends the theory to include *international* recognition and inclusion, seeing it as relevant not only within the United States but within the entire 'Western World'. Puar highlights three aspects of homonationalism: sexual exceptionalism, queer as regulatory, and the ascendancy of whiteness. For our two case studies, the former and the latter are of particular relevance.

Puar posits exceptionalism to be "a process whereby a national population comes to believe in its own superiority," which has resulted in America seeing itself as "the arbiter of appropriate ethics [...] while exempting itself without hesitation from such universalizing mandates" (Puar, 2005, p. 4; 8). The sexual exceptionalism of the West is evidenced by America's critique of Sochi despite failing to

safeguard the rights of LGBTQ people at home, as well as in London's declaration of being "gay friendly" despite having a history and current reality of marginalization of queers and people of color. Puar continues to explain that homosexual sexual exceptionalism occurs through "stagings of US nationalism via a sexual othering" (p. 4). At both the 2012 and 2014 Olympics, Sochi's laws and norms were contrasted with those of the Western World in order to situate Russia as the "intolerant, uncivilized, [and] sexually repressed" Other (LeBlanc, 2013, p. 7). Furthermore, Puar reasons that homonationalism is used to "continue or extend the project of US expansion and imperialism that is endemic to the war on terror" (Puar, 2005, p. 2). Imperialist discourses were prominent in Sochi discussions, with Western norms being promoted in a clear attempt to efface non-Western notions of sexuality and normality.

The ascendancy of whiteness, Puar's third prong of homonationalism, is a concept that "links the violence of liberal deployments of diversity and multiculturalism to the 'valorization of life' alibi that then allows for rampant exploitation of the very subjects included in discourses of diversity in the first instance" (Puar, 2005, p. 3). In essence, the ascendancy of whiteness evaluates how any inclusion offered by liberal diversity is mediated by exclusion, particularly through gender, sexuality, race, and class (p. 25). For example, the "exceptional citizen" does not have to be white per se; however, to be included in the national imaginary as an ethnic body one must be straight and wealthy (p. 25). Puar explains how the market is particularly conducive to producing more patriotic and idealized subjects. Market privileges are able to "reorient [people's] loyalty to the nation" by providing them a taste of the American Dream and a (small) sense of belonging; marginalized groups are able to access a sense of nationality through commodification (p. 26). This concept is important for understanding the way London used gay rights as a marketing strategy by specifically targeting gay

white males who conformed to the Western ideal, while excluding queer people of colour who deviated from the norms. Puar continues to develop this idea to look at how “the homonormative” furthers heteronormativity “through the fractioning away of queer alliances in favour of adherence to the reproduction of class, gender and racial norms” (p. 31-32). This fractioning of alliances is evidenced in the dialogue, cited later on, of certain white gay athletes and the commentary that is made on the Olympics.

Puar’s theory of homonationalism lends itself well to understanding the simultaneous acceptance of certain gay bodies and increased marginalization of others at the Olympics. The Western (not just American) media has accepted and given a voice to the white gay male at the expense of queer people of colour, which plays out on a global scale during the Olympics.

Homonationalism has been constructed around the white cisgender male body as this identity allows for homosexual people to be incorporated into the patriarchy without breaking it down in any significant way. It wards off any threat to the status quo of privilege presented by the homosexual identity (an identity historically excluded from the national imaginary), allowing for the same systems of power and oppression to be perpetuated. Being a gay white cisgender male permits the gay man to be, as Puar would say, an “exceptional citizen”.

## **London**

London was celebrated in the media for its inclusion of LGBT people, a marketing strategy that largely relied on targeting white, upper-class consumers and excluding non-Western/non-conforming sexual identities. London’s bid for the Olympic Games revolved around its pledge to make the Olympics more inclusive, which included marketing itself—from day one—as the “gay-friendly” Olympics (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 4). Notably, London was awarded its bid for the Summer Olympics approximately

six months before the Civil Partnership Act came into effect. Furthermore, it had been working on the bid long-before the Act had been passed, with the process beginning in 1997 (Civil Partnership Info). However, the lack of legislation did not appear to stand in the way of London promoting itself as being a safe and welcoming space for LGBT people before and during the Olympics. Its aim for 'unity in diversity,' and its emphasis on the inclusion of different sexual identities was well received by the media (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 2). For instance, the London Pride House was celebrated as a marker of the 2012 Games' welcoming atmosphere. Louise Englefied, the co-President of the European Gay and Lesbian Sports foundation who volunteered to run the London Pride House, described it as allowing "LGBT people to have a place in the Olympic movement" (Arthur). Within print media, both America's *The Huffington Post* and Canada's *National Post* highlighted the incredibly important and beneficial presence of the London Pride House. The *National Post* went as far as citing Australian diver Matthew Mitcham, who pointed to Vancouver's Pride House as one of the reasons he finally felt comfortable enough to 'come out' (Lawless, 2012; Arthur, 2012). The Pride Houses, it would appear, were life changing. Both newspapers went on to express concerns for gay athletes at Sochi (Lawless, 2012; Arthur, 2012). This praise ignored the fact that the initial location proposed for the London Pride House was rejected, as it was too close to a gay cruising site. This form of sexual expression was considered inappropriate and not a part of the idealized responsible white gay consumer, which London had targeted in its "gay friendly" marketing strategy (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 5). John Amaechi, a former basketball player who identifies as gay, stated that there should not be concern about the presence of a gay cruising strip as "today's LGBT community and their straight friends are as much about family and children, book clubs and Bikram yoga...as any other part of the community" (Hubbard and Wilkinson 6). Here it becomes

evident that there were limitations on who and what actions could be included in the gay-friendly image of London. The city was only promoting certain sexual lifestyles, with sites of “perverse sex” being repressed, as manifested in their denial of gay cruising sites (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p 11).

Human rights lawyer Mark Stephens was often quoted by media sources for his statement calling for countries where homosexuality is illegal to be banned from participating in the 2012 Olympics. Furthermore, he urged gay athletes from those countries to ‘come out’ in London and seek asylum (Dunkin, 2012). Highlighting London as the leader in gay rights—through emphasizing the progressivity of the Pride House and quoting advocates such as Mark Stephens—problematically positions the city as superior to the rest of the world. This furthers imperialist discourses, which is problematic as it normalizes Western notions and overlooks “the various ways same-sex desire is experienced and understood” (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 8). For example, discussions regarding the Pride House were more concerned with the future oppression in Sochi than with the present situation in London. During the London Games, the *National Post* quoted Canadian Chef de Mission, Mark Tewksbury, who stated: “the big challenge is Sochi. That’s where it’s [a Pride House] really needed” (Arthur, 2012).

Presenting Sochi in complete contrast to London failed to acknowledge the ways in which London was also marginalizing people. London’s gay villages were a key aspect of their gay-friendly marketing, but these villages were, and continue to be, frequently reported as unwelcoming to women, people of color, and working-class people. Their marketing relied upon, and sought to attract, the gender-conforming white gay man. London was concerned with a “privatized and depoliticized gay culture based on consumption and domesticity” (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 10). Obviously, this marketing came at the expense of queer folk, but this exclusion was ignored

through the imperialist discourse engendered by comparing London to Sochi and the rest of the Western world.

Journalists had seemingly endless praise for the inclusive atmosphere at the London Olympics, with *London Evening Standard* writer, Ivan Massow, stating “London was THE place for gay athletes to be out” (Massow, 2012). Jonathan Harbourne, of the London-based international newspaper *Gay Star News*, reported on his personal experience—as a gay man—volunteering at the London Olympics. He stated that he had never felt more included than he did during rehearsals for the Opening Ceremonies. Harbourne reported that the group of volunteers was so diverse that no one assumed you were straight. He continued to remark on the legacy the London Olympics had set up for LGBT people and how “the 2012 Olympics made good on its promise to ‘inspire a generation’” (Harbourne). In fact, Harbourne himself was inspired to work on the bid for the 2018 ‘Gay Games’ and expressed excitement about the future of LGBT people and sports in the UK. Despite this report of inclusion, the London Games actually failed to reach their target of 7-10% LGB volunteers, reaching only 5%, with no mention of the inclusion of trans folk (Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2014, p. 9). Harbourne is notably a white male, and was clearly able to develop a sense of belonging and feelings of national pride through his inclusion in, and involvement with, the Olympics.

With no recorded trans volunteers and no trans athletes, the voices and experiences of trans people at the London Olympics were effectively suppressed. Sports have long facilitated transphobia and the Olympics have proven no different, with athletes being required to strictly subscribe to the gender binary. The Olympics have even practiced controversial gender verification testing (Goddard, 2013). Practices like these and the absence of trans folk at the Olympics make the lack of critical dialogue surrounding London strikingly alarming.

From the Pride House, to the diverse volunteers, to the discourse of London as an extremely gay-friendly city, the media reported on how the 2012 Summer Olympics had more space for LGBT people than ever before. However, it is crucial to question who this space was really being made available to and on what terms. The media's discussion of LGBT people and the Olympics perpetuated normalizing discourses that ignored the marginalization and exclusion of queer bodies.

## **Sochi**

The media heavily criticized Sochi's anti-gay laws, but with a problematic discourse that idealized Western norms. This was evidenced in the bias towards identity politics, and the focus on 'coming out' and public visibility (LeBlanc, 2013, p. 10). While these identity politics have been discussed as universal, it is important to recognize visibility as a Western ideal not historically important or prioritized in Russia. Lesbian and gay people in Russia have developed through secret communities as this politicking is situated within their local context, yet the West continues to demand and attempt to impose a more mainstream lesbian and gay rights movement (LeBlanc, 2013, p. 11). The insistence on visibility manifested in a critique of well-known American gay figure skater Johnny Weir. Weir stated that he would still be going to Russia but would not be looking to cause a fuss or make any public scenes. In not adopting or prioritizing the visibility of gayness as is done in America, Johnny Weir was criticized heavily (Terlep, 2014). On the other hand, New Zealand athlete Blake Skjellerup was praised for his pledge to "keep it real." He was celebrated in the press as a white gay man subscribing to Western-style activism rather than adjusting to the local context of Sochi (LeBlanc, 2013, p. 9). There were clearly criteria by which gay people were supposed to abide by in commenting on Russia, which suggested that certain ways of being gay were considered more appropriate than

others. Gay athletes were expected to promote Western norms, and in failing to do so, Weir was ostracized by American citizens, including the gay community itself.

Russia's anti-gay laws were a trending topic in the weeks and months leading up to the 2014 Winter Games. Many called for a boycott of the Olympics in protest, and others demanded Russia be stripped of the Games and they be moved to a previous host city. Among these voices was English comedian, actor, writer, and activist Stephen Fry, who wrote an open letter to Prime Minister David Cameron in which he compared Russia's anti-gay laws to the laws of Nazi Germany and asked Cameron to boycott the games. Fry also proposed the Games be moved to Utah, a previous host city. However, there was no mention of the gay sitcom that had recently been denied airtime on Utah's NBC channel (Leblanc, 2013, p. 1-2). Despite the fact that the majority of these critiques were coming from America, a country that has failed to protect LGBTQ people and guarantee them most rights, comparing itself to Sochi allowed for a nationalist discourse that painted and promoted America as the ideal.

Brian Boitano, former Olympic figure skater and gold medalist, was one of the three U.S. delegates to Sochi. He discussed with *The Huffington Post* his "big decision" to come out prior to the games. Boitano was already out to his friends and family, stating he had always kept his personal life private, but wanted to be publicly out in order to "support the country and the President's message" of tolerance and diversity at Sochi (Boitano, emphasis added). *The Huffington Post* interviewer went on to ask him if he "felt safe" in Sochi, again painting Russia as a dangerous, intolerant place in contrast to a safe and accepting America (Boitano, 2014). The two other U.S. delegates, Caitlin Cahow and Billie Jean King, were also openly gay – and notably all three were white. Again this points to the imperialist discourse, wherein Boitano discussed the need to subscribe to the mainstream identity politics of the West and how in doing so he was fulfilling a patriotic duty. The

homonationalist discourse has perhaps never been so blatant, and on such a grand scale, than in Boitano's quote above. Obama's decision to send three gay delegates was lauded as "a clear message" to Russia about "its treatment of gays and lesbians," with the *National Post* claiming Obama had "serve[d] an ace past Putin," once again one can observe how the media celebrated American homonationalism (Pells, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Media coverage of the Olympics has perpetuated homonationalist discourses that have resulted in the further marginalization of queer people. While London and Sochi were presented very differently in the media on the surface level, being celebrated and critiqued respectively, the same homonationalist framework dominated media coverage in both cities. The idealization and perpetuation of Western imperialist norms has meant that the space and voice created for gay athletes at the Olympics has been made for white, gender-conforming, upper-class gay males and has come at the expense of other segments of the LGBTQ community, such as queer individuals and people of colour. Media coverage at the Olympics has demonstrated how homonationalism can be extended to a global scale with the West as an entity—not just America—seeking to promote certain norms and include specific forms of homosexuality. It is evident through the marketing of London and 'othering' of Sochi that the media has made space for a patriotic, Western white gay male but that this has come at the expense of queer and racialized bodies.

Looking forward, a similar phenomenon is starting to take shape with trans athletes. As briefly mentioned, trans athletes have been overwhelmingly excluded from the Olympics and the media coverage surrounding them. Now, as the visibility of trans issues increases, gender conformity and the gender binary have taken center stage. Hormonal requirements are being proposed so that trans people will

be able to compete (Zeigler). Requiring a certain level of hormones dismisses the identity of trans folks who do not meet the set requirements as illegitimate. And, of course, trans folks who identify as non-binary or genderqueer are completely left out of the picture. The story of trans athletes in the Olympics is just beginning, but it appears to be taking an unfortunately familiar path of adopting certain bodies at the expense of other, less normative ones.

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