

LGBT Rights: Winners and Losers in Sweden

Kehl, Katharina. 2020. *The Right Kind of Queer: Race, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Constructions of Swedishness*. PhD diss. University of Gothenburg: School of Global Studies. (165 pages)

IN HER PHD thesis, *The Right Kind of Queer: Race, Sexuality, and Gender in Contemporary Constructions of Swedishness* (2020), Katharina Kehl interrogates the role of LGBT rights in contemporary imaginaries of Swedish national identity. Prompted by the appearance of LGBT people in Swedish military recruitment campaigns and in right-wing Swedish nationalist narratives, Kehl asks, “What is happening when political actors and institutions best known for their affinity to national flag-waving [...] suddenly start to raise the multicoloured flag that has come to symbolise the fight for recognition of LGBT rights?” (2).

This question provides the starting point for a thoughtful exploration of LGBT rights, gender exceptionalism and homonationalism in Sweden. Kehl demonstrates how gay rights function to demarcate who is included/excluded in understandings of Swedishness. In short, one must be the “right kind” of LGBT person, which Kehl argues requires being queer in ways that are acceptable and also intelligible to society – something that is particularly challenging for LGBT people who are “racialised as non-white and/or Muslim” (a phrase used throughout to denote specific identity constructions), due to assumptions that one’s

race and/or religion is fundamentally incompatible with one's queerness.

The thesis combines four published articles (Kehl 2018; 2020a; 2020b; Strand & Kehl 2019) with a five-chapter *kappa* that adroitly draws together the articles' insights and guides the reader through the project's evolution and conceptual framework. The result is a highly coherent thesis that is considerably greater than the sum of its parts in its analysis of Swedishness through the lenses of othering and boundary-making, racialisations, LGBT subjectivities and intelligibility.

A compilation thesis begs the question of where to begin reading – with the articles themselves, or with the *kappa*. While both approaches work, beginning with the articles enables the fullest engagement with the complexities that Kehl explores. To summarise the articles in order of presentation, in “Homonationalism Revisited” Kehl (2020a) argues for responding to “existing critiques of homonormativity, homonationalism and homocolonialism” (17) by paying greater attention to race and “how certain individuals and groups are more susceptible to the dangers of not being included in the ‘gay-rights-as-human-rights’ catalogue” (34). She concludes by observing that the spread of right-wing nationalisms and anti-LGBT backlashes mean that “fights for legal rights will most likely have to continue to go hand in hand with our most nuanced critiques” of these phenomena (34).

The second article, an interrogation of 2016's “Pride Järva” organised by a right-wing publicist (Kehl 2018) illustrates this point elegantly, showing how nationalist discourses use white, Western LGBT people “as markers against racialised non-Western (often Islamic) others” via “homonationalist narratives of threat and protection” (676). Kehl demonstrates how racialisation demarcates the “right kind of queers”, entangling LGBT rights “in violent practices of exclusion” (687). Both this and the third article, a co-authored analysis of how the Swedish Armed Forces' marketing campaigns use LGBT rights to represent Sweden “as a progressive nation/state” (Strand & Kehl 2019: 296), highlight how “Swedish gender exceptionalism is easily appropriated by a form of cultural racism” that designates “certain people as good, white, Swedish, feminist and LGBT-friendly” and others “as non-white, non-Swedish,

patriarchal, homophobic, criminal and violent” (299–300). The consequences of this racialised identity boundary-making are addressed in the final article, which explores how “LGBTQ people racialised as non-white and/or Muslim” navigate the perceived incompatibility of their identities in Swedish LGBT contexts (Kehl 2020b: 150).

If the articles form the “front stage” of the thesis, then the *kappa* provides a welcome opportunity to go “back stage” and appreciate the study from a more intimate angle. Kehl is insightful, reflexive and open in her presentation of the project, guiding the reader with a light and confident touch. Chapter 1 lays out the research aims and questions, explains the ontological and epistemological foundations, and concisely discusses the various theoretical and empirical contributions.

Chapter 2 then contextualises the study. Beginning with the concepts of homonormativity (Duggan 2002) and homonationalism (Puar 2006), Kehl discusses LGBT rights, European values, and the racialised othering inherent in configuring Europe as “LGBT-friendly”. The final section of the chapter presents a powerful account of how hegemonic whiteness and gender exceptionalism structure notions of Swedishness.

The scene set, Chapter 3 is an in-depth engagement with the key concepts of boundary-making, grids of intelligibility and racialisation. All three are covered thoroughly and connected to the wider thesis, as is the final section on operationalising the theoretical framework. The underdevelopment of the notion of “haunting” that is introduced when discussing boundaries and belonging (37) is a rare shortcoming; although it re-appears briefly in subsequent discussion of grids of intelligibility (49) and twice in Strand and Kehl’s 2019 article, it remains tantalisingly ephemeral, its analytical promise underfulfilled.

Chapter 4 shifts discussion to research design and methods. Often viewed as a chapter that can be relegated to an appendix in any subsequent monograph, this is an important and meaningful chapter that enhances the reader’s understanding of the study. It would also be a worthy inclusion on any social science research methods syllabus, especially for its consideration of writing as method.

The final chapter presents the study's conclusions, addressing the very tangible implications for those who are LGBT and racialised as non-white and/or Muslim, before concisely summarising the thesis' contributions. Finally, three research directions are identified: closer examination of LGBT people's lived experiences in Sweden; the wider geopolitics of LGBT rights and nationalism; and analysis of domestic "LGBTQ-phobia" to denaturalise Sweden's LGBT-friendly identity (119).

While focused on Sweden, the broader significance of the study is unmissable, showing starkly how rights for some LGBT people are won at the cost of excluding others. Certainly, there is scope for further work in the directions identified, and also to tease out the configuration of "racialised as non-white and/or Muslim" that is used to capture the overlap of Islamophobia and racialisation, but *The Right Kind of Queer* provides an excellent base from which to proceed for academics and activists alike. While Kehl rightly states that the project "is more than ready to live its own life beyond the university" (106), it is also still needed within academe both as critique and call to action.

CAI WILKINSON
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

REFERENCES

- Duggan, Lisa. 2002. "The New Homonormativity. The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." In *Materialising Democracy: Toward a Revitalised Cultural Politics*, edited by Dana Nelson and Russ Castronova, 175–94. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kehl, Katharina. 2018. "In Sweden, girls are allowed to kiss girls, and boys are allowed to kiss boys': Pride Järva and the inclusion of the 'LGBT other' in Swedish nationalist discourses." *Sexualities* 21(4): 674–691.
- Kehl, Katharina. 2020a. "Homonationalism Revisited: Race, Rights, and Queer Complexities." *lambda nordica* 25(2): 17–38.
- Kehl, Katharina. 2020b. "Did queeer Muslims even exist?' – racialised grids of intelligibility in Swedish LGBT contexts." *Social Identities* 26(2): 150–165.
- Puar, Jasbir. 2006. "Mapping US Homonormativities." *Gender, Place & Culture* 13(1): 67–88.

Strand, Sanna & Katharina Kehl. 2019. "A country to fall in love with/in': gender and sexuality in Swedish Armed Forces' marketing campaigns." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21(2): 295-314.