Queer Travels:
Networked Society, Digitizing Queerness and Political Surveillance

Abstract

Queer epistemology confronts and critiques not only the regimes of heteronormativity, but also other kinds of hierarchies and normative regimes. In line with such genealogy, this paper aims to examine how queer politics as a site of global connection contrast with the lived experiences of queer people in homophobic society, especially in the era of globalization with the proliferation of information and communication technologies.

Key Words

Networked Society; Queer Politics; Political Surveillance

Introduction

The gay liberation movement began in the 1970s, after the Stonewall Riots in New York. The movement was identity-based and focused on the agency of the individual. Queer theory, in contrast, highlights the structures of inequality, especially hetero-normativity and calls for unified resistance to hegemonic practice especially persecution, marginalization, and discrimination against non-conforming genders and sexualities. In Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory (1993), Michael Warner marked a new milestone for queer theorizing or queer politics. Moving beyond sexual identification, Warner and many queer theorists in the United States suggest looking at queer politics as a political strategy that encompasses "a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal."[1] In so doing, queer epistemology confronts and critiques not only the regimes of heteronormativity, but also other kinds of hierarchies and normative regimes that expand to a "broader demand for justice and freedom."[2] In line with such genealogy, this paper aims to examine how queer politics as a site of global connection contrast with the lived experiences of queer people in homophobic society, especially in the era of globalization with the proliferation of information and communication technologies.

This paper examines one specific place and space, Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia and a newly emerging "global city"[3] in Southeast Asia. This paper focuses on Kuala Lumpur because, beginning in the 1970s, international trade began to expand, linking Malaysia to other industrialized nation-states. The 1990s marked the emergence of digital technologies and internet. The two conditions, material and communicative set the stage for the production of a digital space where queer politics could flourish. The first part of this paper explores the infrastructures of the "global city" of Kuala Lumpur by drawing upon Saskia Sassen's analysis of global connectivity[4] and Manuel Castells' thesis on the rise of network society,[5] I begin this section with a historical review of two important social processes that I believe have largely constituted the character of Kuala Lumpur in the past three decades, namely, the rise of the "global city" and the development of informational global economy. Specifically, this section will examine the implications of the political and economic development from the export-oriented

---

[1] Warner, Michael (1993) *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Minnesota Press. P. xxvi

[2] ibid. p.x.

[3] I am drawing on Sassen Saskia's concept of global city. See Sassen, Saskia (2001 [1991]) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

[4] Sassen, Saskia (2002) "Locating Cities On Global Circuits." In *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol 14, No. 1, April 2002. P. 13-22.

[5] Castells, Manuel (2000, 2010) *The Rise of The Network Society*, 2nd Edition, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

industries that began in the 1970s through the launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor Project in the 1990s that spearheaded Malaysia's digital age.

The second part of the paper focuses on the parallels between newly emerging queer[6] politics and increased political surveillance by emerging state-led political Islamists. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism that began in Malaysia in the late 1970s led to increased moral policing starting in the 1990s. This section looks at how openness and policing simultaneously occurred in the digital spaces under such social political situations and how this social phenomena has complicated the question of (in)visibility and queerness in digital space. In particular, I explore the ways queer politics are being digitized in the internet in Malaysia from using anonymous listserves for forum and community building in the 1990s to using identity-based social media for sexual rights campaigns in the new millennium. Therefore, this section of the paper explores how digital spaces make activism possible, and at the same time, examines the implications of political homophobia on Malaysian queers in the digital space and urban space of Malaysia. This paper focuses on the "It Gets Better Malaysia" project and the sexual rights festival 'Seksualiti Merdeka' to demonstrate what are and what could be open structures in Malaysia's queer activism and to expose the caveats that accompany these structures.

In my conclusion, I link the major arguments in the whole paper, especially the growing global connections and the social transformations that take place in Kuala Lumpur's queer community. By using Tom Boellstorff's "dubbing culture"[7] as a theoretical metaphor, I contrast developing queer identities with emerging Islamic fundamentalism. Boellstorff's theory of "dubbing culture" describes the ways that ideologically separated groups may find mutual accommodation and communication, but may be subject to what Elizabeth Povinelli called "incommensurability", the inevitable distorted translations between "two systems of thought, language and culture" (Boellstorff 2007:139). In this case, both the Islamic authorities and the Malaysian Muslim queer community share the Islamic paradigm, however transgender practice and same-sex desires spark a deeply unconmensurable space between official religious interpretations by ulamas and personal struggles with sexual identity. Specifically, this section addresses the intersection of religion, sexual desires, national belonging and identity policing in today's globalized world of Malaysia.

Part 1: The Infrastructure Of The Global City

Global Connectivity and Networked Society: The Rise of the Global City and the Informational Global Economy

The term "mini dragon" was coined in 1995 to describe the rising Southeast Asian economies, Newly Industrialized Economies (NIH), who participation in global capitalism rose dramatically in the last decades of the 20th century. Malaysia's designation as a mini dragon came as a result of its active engagement with foreign investments. Kuala Lumpur, as the capital city of Malaysia, emerged as a "global city", which Saskia Sassen defines as major cities that "have emerged as a strategic site not only for global capital but also for the transnationalization of labor and the formation of transnational identities." The concurrent rise of the internet throughout this economic growth provokes a host of questions for the interplay of Malaysia's Islamic politics, economics and communication.

---

[6] The term "queer" is used in this paper to refer to people of non-conforming gender and sexuality, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, intersex, questioning (LGBTIQ).

[7] Boellstorff, Tom (2003) "Dubbing Culture: Indonesian Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities and Ethnography in an already Globalized World." In *American Ehnologies*, Volume 30. Number 2, May 2003.

What are the historical components of Malaysia's rise in the international economic arena? How has Malaysia's participation in the informational global economy transformed Malaysia's population as producers and uses of information and communication technology (ICT)? How has the construction of the Multimedia Super corridor Project affected the development of networking communities? In answering these questions, this section lays the context for understanding Malaysia's position as an opening, plural society and a global participant economically, socially, and politically.

Malaysia is a former British colony in Southeast Asia. It is a federal constitutional monarchy, consists of thirteen states and three federal territories. Geographically, the country is separated by the South China Sea into Peninsular Malaysia and two states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo. Peninsular Malaysia stretched between Thailand and Singapore. It was known as Malaya during colonial time, and the Malay kingdoms were present in the area from the 15th century. Malaya became subject to the British empire in the 18th century with British territories, known as the Straits Settlements were established in Singapore, Malacca and Penang followed by the Malay kingdoms becoming British protectorates. While Malaya gained its independence from the British on August 31, 1957, Malaysia was established when Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the Federation of Malaya on September 16, 1963. Less than two years later in 1965, Singapore was expelled from the federation. Since independence, Malaysia has had one of the best economic records in Asia with GDP growing an average 6.5% for almost fifty years followed by rapid industrialization and the large amount of foreign direct investment (FDI). Kuala Lumpur has been the capital city of Malaysia since its independence in 1957. In 1999, the seat of government shifted from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya, a planned city located twenty-five kilometers from Kuala Lumpur while the seat of the King and Parliament and the country's commercial and financial center remains in Kuala Lumpur.

As discussed in Manuel Castells's *The Rise of Network Society*, these "new industrial spaces" are largely an outcome of "the technological and organizational ability to separate the production process in different locations while reintegrating its unity through telecommunications linkages, and micro-electronics-based precision and flexibility in the fabrication of components." (2010:417)[8] Mapping the locational pattern of American electronic firms constituted by the international spatial division of labor from the beginnings of such offshore industries around the mid-1960s, Castells specifically highlighted Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia as pioneers for attracting the movement of factories of American electronics corporations. (2010:418) The emergence of these peripheralized localities was parallel to the rise of global cities in the 1960s, as argued by Saskia Sassen (2001), a result of the rapid internationalization of the financial industry, enabled by the expansion of information and communication technologies.[9]

Apart from the low production costs in the region, the United States of America's active investment in Southeast Asia's economic development since the mid-1960s was largely motivated by their foreign policies following the Korean War "as a way of stabilizing the region politically." (Sassen 1998:40)[10] As early as the 1970s, the emergence of Free Trade Zones in Malaysia has constituted what Saskia Sassen called the peripheralized localities, as part of the

---

[8] See Castells, Manuel (2010) *The Rise of the Network Society*. MA, Oxford and West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. P. 418.
[9] Saskia Sassen argued that the current form of globalization that is spearheaded by the expansion of an information-based economy and internationalization of financial industry mainly took place within cosmopolitan settings. Her theorization of the global cities by examining New York, London and Tokyo provides rich insights into the study of globalization and networked technology. See Sassen, Saskia (2001 [1991]) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
[10] See Saskia Sassen (1998) *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money*. New York: The New Press.

strategic networks of global cities (2004:650)[11] These industrial spaces mainly cater to export-oriented industries, especially for electronic-based information and technology industries. Nonetheless, the rapid expansion of export-oriented industrialization in Malaysia since the 1970s is neither merely a localized phenomenon resulting from the global corporate strategies as an effect of economic globalization of information and communication technologies, nor the effect of the regional political interests of the United States.

In *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*, Ong[12] challenged the hegemonic approach to interrogating capitalism as a diffuse and abstract form of economic globalization. (Ong 2011:7) Saskia Sassen's concept of "global cities," as discussed in *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo (2001[1991])* and *Global Networks: Linked Cities* (2002),[13] highlights the crucial role played by information and communication technologies for the expansion of global capitalism, especially in supporting and intensifying the emergence of global financial institutions that are located in global cities. Aihwa Ong pointed out that in the last decade, the world's ten fastest-growing cities were found in the Asian region. (Ong 2011:7) Drawing on Foucault's idea that the city is a milieu, Ong posited spatializing practices as "the gathering and the dispersing of circulating ideas, forms, and techniques, are constitutive of emerging globalized spaces." (2011:10) Ong argued that "spatializing practices thus form the urban as a problem-space in which a cast of disparate actors – the state, capitalists, NGOs, foreign experts, and ordinary people – define what is problematic, uncertain, or in need of mediation, and then go about solving these now-identified problems with urban planning, class politics, and human capital. The starting point of analysis is thus not how singular principles define city environment, but rather the array of problem-solving and spatializing practices that are in play in shaping an urban field." (Ong 2011: 10)

The Launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor Project

As an obvious signpost, in 1997, under the former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed's administration, the Government of Malaysia designated a vast territory next to the capital city for the Multimedia Super Corridor Project. Through this project, it was aiming to leapfrog Malaysia from a developing country into the information and knowledge age by attracting both the local and foreign multinational corporations (MNCs) to collaborate with government agencies for production and consumption of multimedia technologies. The Multimedia Super Corridor project intended to build a new physical as well as electronic city connected by webs of fiber optics, integrating telematic applications to create a social information infrastructure towards a new digital age, stretching from the Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC) to the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), including the new administrative cities of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya.

However, in the past fifteen years, the Multimedia Super Corridor project has not proceed as it had been imagined, but it has effectively transformed the infrastructure of the capital city, Kuala Lumpur by linking it with two newly built administrative cities, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, opened up new information and communication structure with the introduction of digital technologies. Since Internet technology became popular in the country in 1998, both nonurban and urban residents have started to incorporate Internet technology into their lives. Cyberspace

---

[11] Saskia Sassen contended the emergence of peripheralized localities "enabled a politics of places on global networks," See Sassen, Saskia (2004) "Local Actors in Global Politics." In *Current Sociology*, July 2004, Vol. 52(4):649-670, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: SAGE Publications. P.650.
[12] See Ong, Aihwa (2011) "Introduction: The Act of Being Global." In Roy, Ananya and Aihwa Ong (ed) (2011) *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Wiley Blackwell.
[13] See Saskia Sassen (ed) (2002) *Global Networks: Linked Cities*. New York: Routledge.

has been imagined as an important social space for networking communities. The percentage of population that uses the Internet has increased from 10% in 1999 to 57.6% in 2009 (World Bank's World Development Indicators). According to the Foreign Trade Statistics 2008,[14] Malaysia is listed as the fifteenth- trading partner of the United States in terms of imports. In 2011, at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) Summit in Hawaii (November 21, 2011), the president of United States, Barack Obama, announced a plan to create a trans-Pacific free trade zone following on the introduction of Trans-Pacific Partnership by the United States government as a regional strategy to counter the economic growth of China.[15]

Part II: Digitizing Queerness: The Emergence Of Queer Identity, Queer Politics In The Digital Space, And Moral Policing of Digitized Spaces And State-led Political Islam

Politicization of Homosexuality: Postcolonial Politics and Islam Insurgency

Since the decade of nineties, Queer desires have been framed under the typology of 'homosexuality' and politicized by state leadership in Malaysia. It is crucial to conceptualize the demonizing and moral policing of 'homosexuality' within a spatial schema. Within the spatial structure of Malaysian state politics, sexual minorities are fixed in a hegemonic gaze observed by the authority.

In a postcolonial context, Malaysia started embracing modernization with an ambivalent attitude since the 1970s. Interestingly, while the political leadership was looking forward to the progress and modernity of the Western countries, at the same time, they always selectively posit certain Western values as a threat to local tradition and identity. Nationalist and anti-colonial discourses have been widely deployed by leaders in developing countries to demarcate the (invented) boundaries between the Western and the National worlds.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir was one of the champions in charting the so-called 'social ills of the West' in his anti-imperialism discourses. By propagating the Malaysian version of Asian Values, Tun Dr. Mahathir positioned himself as the moral guardian of the nation-state who took responsibility in disciplining the behaviors and thinking of the people in a nation that were undergoing rapid industrialization and modernization under his administration. Selectively, he regarded many transformations in the post-war Western societies as the corrupting influence of 'Western values,' and 'homosexuality' was cited as one of corrupting outcomes of these transformations. (Mahathir in Michael D. Barr 2002:43)[16]

The 'homosexual' rights movement and the rediscovery of gay and lesbian history in the North American and European countries in the 1960s prompted him to acknowledge the visibility of 'homosexuality,' especially to be threatened by the rights claimed for 'homosexuality.' By the 1990s, Tun Dr. Mahathir further condemned 'homosexuality' as Western neo-imperialism by conflating 'homosexual' practice and identity with 'homosexual' human rights. Indeed, Tun Dr. Mahathir and his administration played a crucial role in politicizing and normalizing heterosexuality under the notion of Asian family values.

---

[14] See http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/highlights/top/top0812yr.html

[15] It is reported that 21 APEC countries account for 41% of global trade, and they also make up of 40% of the world's population. Currently, there are nine countries that have joined the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), and Malaysia is negotiating to join. But, China is not included and has yet expressed interest in joining the TPP. (See http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-15704358)

[16] Barr, Michael D. 2002. *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon.

In a similar vein but with a slightly different emphasis, Islam resurgence in the country, promoted by both the government and the opposition, also reverberated with homophobic sentiments by reinforcing heterosexual normalcy. By the 1990s, same-sex sexualities (for men and women) were codified into the Muslim legal system with the amendment of the Syariah law and Hudud. Under new regulations, women's same-sex sexuality is considered a criminal offence and subject to legal actions. Consequently, religious departments and the Syariah Court established this authority and legitimacy by criminalizing Muslim women's same-sex sexual behaviors and relationships. These politicizations of homosexuality not only normalized public space, but also rendered marginalized sexualities to trespassing on the public space and easily targeted for public persecution.

Queer Politics as Spatial Strategy: Public Space/Sphere, Political Organization and State Politics

Epistemologically and politically, the issue of visibility is often closely linked to a distinction between the public and the private. In the past decades, the theme "(in)visibility" has been widely articulated and theorized in gay and lesbian liberation identity politics following the critique of sexual repression, in general. Most often, visibility is celebrated as public recognition of marginalized sexualities and of the persons who embody such sexual desires; of this history and to spatial territories within each context. Ideally the public spaces claimed to demonstrate the potential of the public sphere in which the inhabitants can participate in political organization independent from state intervention. As Mitchell explained,

> (public spaces are) very importantly, spaces for representation. That is, public space is a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen. In public space, political organizations can represent themselves to a larger population. By claiming space in public, by creating public spaces, social groups themselves become public. (Mitchell 1995:115)

Inevitably, distinctions between the public and the private and the spatial schema of visibility are deeply rooted in political philosophy in the context of the nation-state. As an ideal type, the public (both its political and spatial dimensions) denotes a territory for social, rational, and critical public discourse, and civil society for justice and citizenship (Bruce Robbins in Nancy Duncan 1996:128). However, it is crucial to identify carefully the fine line between public space and the public sphere. Nancy Duncan argued 'public spaces and public spheres often do not map neatly onto one another.' (1996:130)

In a nation-state that has not yet recognized sexuality as a human right or citizenship right, public space has a tendency to leave sexuality and gender subject to state politics and regulation. Within this context, public space tends to be the site of state politics and regulation even intimidating or threatening social space for people who deviate from the heterosexual normaltivity. John D'Emilio's study, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* clearly verified this:

> Exposure promised punishment and ostracism. It hovered about gay life as an ever present danger, always reminding homosexual men and women of the need for secrecy and careful management of information about their sexual preferences. Coupled with the restrictions that social custom and law placed on public discussion of homosexuality, fear of discovery kept the gay world invisible. (John D'Emilio 1983:13)

What really intrigues me is D'Emilio's invisibility. Even though sexual minorities have access to public space, nonetheless, their incapacity to embody their non-conforming sexuality as part of their self-identity debase their essential sense of right to public space. This ever-present

threat of attack constantly reminds them of their position of exteriority, and renders them invisible. In this view, lived experiences of sexual marginalized groups challenge a normative ideal of public space as the public sphere open to all by pointing out how on-site power struggles impinge on the identity and subjectivity of sexual minorities.

I would like to explore to what extent of the emergence of the 'electronic public realm' in Malaysia through Internet technology, has facilitated a political and empowering visibility to the Queer communities for Malaysians. One of the issues pertaining to the emergence of such virtual cities was whether they are able to facilitate 'electronic democracy' initiatives that will enable wider social access to the Internet and improve relations between citizens, political representatives and public or private service providers. (Aurigi 2000:34)

Digitizing Queerness: Agency and Embodiment in the Digital Space

In general, the lack of open and friendly public spaces for non-conforming desires in Malaysia society has made the existence of Queer people (LGBTIQs) appear to be invisible in the formal public realm of the country. For instance, women-who-desire-women communities have always been organizing themselves in small groups, but their activities used to be widely publicized within and among their communities only through interpersonal contact and small group organizations. Many women who desire women lived their identities within virtual spaces, especially on listserves or websites in the late 1990s that were perceived as safe, and depended on the openness and acceptance of those who associated or participated in those spaces. The subcultures of women who desire women, though growing, kept themselves well away from the hostile public gaze.

In 1992, under the Pink Triangle, a community-based organization that worked on HIV/AIDS issues, a well-organized Women on Women (WOW) program started to function systematically throughout the 1990s, and was capable of mobilizing a large number of Queer women in the capital city, not only creating a safe social space for community building but also enhancing the visibility of women who love women within the community locally and internationally. Although on one level politicization of homosexuality in the context of state politics was clearly repressive in the resulting public surveillance and persecution of marginalized sexualities, on the other hand, such oppression also generated a starting point for opposing strategies in the public sphere.

With the introduction of Internet technologies to urban areas in the 1990s, lesbian's activities became more visible in the "virtual community." At the dawn of the new millennium, there were around ten Malaysian women-who-love-women websites/webzines publicized on the Internet. Lesbian websites or webzines have used for community building and consciousness raising by providing a wider national network to acquire information and to exchange opinions on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

How did this "virtual community" enhance the collective existence of women who desire women in Malaysia with the assumed anonymity of identity in virtual space? How did visibility of this "virtual community" help to create a supportive environment for self-identification and self-assurance? The network initiated by the webzines and mailing lists further enhanced solidarity building by communication and sharing of information among communities. The Internet served as additional cultural capital for some of the lesbian communities without public revenues for social mobilization but who had access to the Internet in the urban areas in the country. There were more and more gatherings, parties and sports activities organized by lesbian groups with the help of the Internet for publicity and sharing of information.

Public space such as pubs, cafés and restaurants, and sport venues also provided a very important social space for women who desire women in Kuala Lumpur. Both private avenues and the Internet offered them various sites for organizing, affirming collective solidarity or, in other

words, for empowerment and resistance. As argued by Nancy Duncan, space can be negotiated on a number of different levels and for different reasons. Duncan quotes Habermas, "Both private and public spaces are heterogeneous and not all space is clearly private or public. Space is thus subject to various territorializing and deterritorializing processes whereby local control is fixed, claimed, challenged, forfeited and privatised." (Qtd. in Duncan 1996: 129)[17]

Even though there was increased community building among women who love women in Kuala Lumpur, they were still very heterogeneous. Apart from the diverse gender and sexual identifications, class, ethnicity, language and political ideology also influenced their sense of belongingness and affected the issue of access. Bamadhaj also cautioned that even though organizing within privatized space protects them from public scrutiny, those who do not have access to the social cultural spaces in urban areas may not feel a sense of personal presence. This in turn perpetuates the small scale organizing and thus their representation in the community as a whole. Furthermore, lack of public visibility may also lead to a lack of politicization of their rights as sexually marginalized communities (Nadiah Bamadhaj 1999).[18] To counter the lack of public appearance of Queer in Malaysia, a sexual rights festival "Seksualiti Merdeka" emerged in 2008 in Kuala Lumpur.

The Sexual Rights Festival, "Seksualiti Merdeka": The Discourse Of National Belonging and Human Rights

Seksualiti Merdeka (Sexuality Independence) is a coalition of activists, artists, intellectuals, and non-governmental organizations who aimed to celebrate the human rights of people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations since 2008. The first festival was organized in conjunction with the Independence Day of Malaysia (August 31) by a small group of gay and lesbians in the capital city of Malaysia Kuala Lumpur in 2008. The co-founder Pang Khee Teik is a member of the Malaysia Rainbow Network, a sexuality rights listserv that was set up in 2003 and affiliated with Amnesty International office in Malaysia. In that year, Pang had just resigned from Kakiseni, a Malaysian performing arts website, and assumed a new position as the arts program director at the Annexe Gallery in Central Market in the downtown capital city Kuala Lumpur. The first Seksualiti Merdeka festival with its three-day event had gathered a significant crowd of people of non-conforming genders and sexuality and supporters of sexuality rights.

Pang's initial idea was to foster a space by utilizing the location and logistic support of the festive event to allow for talking about sexual diversity and marginalized communities. The festival, with it's motto in 2008, "If one of us ain't free, none of us are", instrumentally brought together artists, writers, academics, researchers, activists and young people who were self-identified as LGBT or openly supportive of gender and sexuality issues. To remember the right to sexual freedom as Malaysian citizens, the event was held on the Independence Day weekend. As Julian Lee from Monash University Malaysia explained, "While celebrating Malaysia's independence from colonialism and reclaiming possession of our own nation, at The Annexe Gallery that weekend, some Malaysians were making the case for the next form of merdeka: the reclaiming of the rightful place of sexual diversity in Malaysia and freedom from discrimination and abuse, and towards an accepting, informed and understanding rakyat (people)." (The Star

---

[17] Duncan, Nancy (1996) "Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces." In Duncan, Nancy. ed. *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge.

[18] Bamadhaj, Nadiah (1999) "The Hot Potato: Sexuality Rights Advocacy in Malaysia." In *Saksi*, January.

online, September 18, 2008)[19]

While the event drew little attention from the mainstream press, the English daily gave rather fair coverage with interviews, and two Chinese papers carried a small article about the event, though there was no reporting in any Malay dailies that year. But the event achieved a significant presence in digital space, for example, in the online gay magazine, Fridae.com. Immediately after the first celebration, participants spontaneously utilized the social network site Facebook to continue new social relationships. The availability of social media provided them with another option than the usual listserv. The "Seksualiti Merdeka" blog and Facebook pages were set up concurrently, and in the following year, "Seksualiti Merdeka" 2009 with the theme "Our Bodies, Our Rights" had a more elaborative presence online, its discourse of rights became more apparent, ranging from issues of privacy, moral policing and a human rights approach to sexuality. As declared in their website, "We aim to affirm sexuality rights as a human right, empower individuals and communities of all sexualities, and create platforms for advocacy of sexuality rights." (Seksualitimerdeka.org)[20].

Simultaneously, in that year, "Seksualiti Merdeka" reached out to allies in civil society, for example, the Bar Council Human Rights Committee, a well-established HIA/AIDS organization, the PT Foundation, a human rights non-governmental organization, SUARAM, and a few women's organizations, like KRYSS, and the Women's Candidacy Initiative (WCI), Persatuan Kesedaran Komuniti Selangor (Empower), and some other progressive arts groups, like Purple Lab, Matahari Books, twenty.one kitchen & bar, and the Annexe Gallery itself came together to become sponsors for the festival. This political climate indeed provided a enabling environment for Seksualiti Merdeka to become more coalitional in their outlook.

The 2010 Seksualiti Merdeka with the theme, "We Are Family!" was officiated by Edmund Bon, the Chairperson of the Constitutional Law Committee at the Malaysian Bar Council, and during the opening ceremony, a speech was delivered by the Representative of the United Nations in Malaysia. On the other hand, Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, the daughter of a homophobic former prime minister, was invited to the festival as a long-time sexual rights supporter and writer even though her father was the first prime minister who openly attributed "homosexuality" to be Western decay under his campaign for Asian family values. During the festival, Marina Mahathir reaffirmed the importance of acceptance and celebration of diverse sexualities by saying, "Seksualiti Merdeka is a much needed frank look at the very core of all us human beings, our sexuality, and the diversity that lies within. We need to accept and then celebrate."[21]

In that year, the discourse of sexuality rights had become much more sophisticated with the publication of the review of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia, SUHAKAM – After 9 Years[22]. For the first time, a chapter on Rights of Vulnerable Groups: The Role of SUHAKAM in Furthering LGBT Rights was included in this annual review. By grounding sexuality rights discourse firmly within the parameters set forth in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia and related international conventions and treaties[23], this publication provided a strategic language for articulating a rights claim that connected the national to the international. Such language was re-circulated on the Seksualiti Merdeka blog,

---

[19] See http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2008/9/14/lifefocus/1977271&sec=lifefocus
[20] See http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/search?updated-min=2010-01-01T00:00:00%2B08:00&updated-max=2011-01-01T00:00:00%2B08:00&max-results=20
[21] See http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/2010/10/seksualiti-merdeka-2010-we-are-family.html
[22] See Wong, Yuenmei. "Rights of Vulnerable Groups: The Role of SUHAKAM in Furthering LGBT Rights." In *SUHAKAM After 9 Years: Time for SUHAKAM to Regain Public Confidence*. ERA Consumer, Malaysia, 2010.
http://www.seahrw.org/v1/index.php?option=com_phocadownload&view=category&id=1&Itemid=84
[23] For examples, the *UN International Human Rights Charter*, and the *Yogyakarta Principles*.

This year, Malaysia's only sexuality rights festival, Seksualiti Merdeka, celebrates the spirit of family. Exploring the bonds that bring us together, the festival aims to promote both the family and the community's role in embracing diversity. As the nation strives to realise its full democratic potential, with Malaysians becoming more aware of our constitutional rights, let's not forget about our sexuality rights. It is our right to be responsible for our own bodies, to be free from discrimination, violence and injustice, and to be treated equally, regardless of gender, sexuality, age, class, ethnicity or beliefs. Each of us has these rights, as enshrined by the UN International Human Rights Charter, the Yogyakarta Principles, and promoted by many human rights organisations local and international.[24]

While "Seksualiti Merdeka" developed to a larger coalition politics with clearer sexual rights discourses in that same year, the "It Gets Better Malaysia Project" attracted hate speech and death threats in its online appearance in virtual space.

Political Arrests in the Virtual Space: "It Gets Better In Malaysia"

In 2010, after a rash of news stories of homophobia bullies against gay teenagers and young adults in the United States, an online campaign titled "It Gets Better" went viral on YouTube. Thousands of individuals posted their testimonies to share their coming-out stories and some were about the gay rights movement in the United States. This campaign aimed to create supportive messages to reach out to gay teenagers who were feeling isolated or felt suicidal because of their sexuality. Soon after the campaign began, a Malaysian young lesbian who had attempted suicide when she was on a scholarship studying in the United States was contacted by a journalist from an independent online Internet press, Malaysiakini.com to start a Malaysian version of the It Gets Better in Malaysia Project.

When the news of this online video project was made known to the virtual communities of Malaysian queers, the co-founder of "Seksualiti Merdeka", Pang decided to initiate a Malaysia community-based "It Gets Better in Malaysia Project," using YouTube and in-house screenings as their major media. One of their "It Gets Better" videos featured a Muslim man's coming out story. Immediately the video was widely circulated by anti-homosexuality individuals on blogs and Facebook who clearly attacked the video with hate speech. Within just a few days, this fear that generated became unbearable for Queers in this 'electronic public realm' and a decision was made to call for collective strategies to counter such online homophobia attacks. They were not even sure who the attackers were or how many of them existed, but given the more then 30 thousands hits on the video and the lopsided hate speech directed at the video, they felt tremendous stress.

Digital technologies have been conceived as a mode of decorporealization and dematerialization[25], cyberspace even tends to be represented as spaces of disembodiment and thus as a new kind of space unconstrained by the limits of corporeality. Nonetheless, in this episode of moral panic created by online homophobia, bullies demonstrated that the subject who is observing the virtual body is not a disembodied observer. Instead, a visual objectification of a presumed body experience may lead to some significant material consequences to the corporeal bodies of the observers.

---

[24] See http://www.seksualitimerdeka.org/search?updated-min=2010-01-01T00:00:00%2B08:00&updated-max=2011-01-01T00:00:00%2B08:00&max-results=20

[25] Grosz, Elizabeth (2001) "Lived Spatiality: The Spaces of Corporeal Desire," "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Real," *Architecture From The Outside: Essays On Virtual and Real Space*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In the following year, 2011, state authority under the precept of religion, Islam, banned "Seksualiti Merdeka" organized that year around the theme "Queer Without Fear". Despite Seksualiti Merdeka's critical political stance to celebrate the human rights of people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, many suspected that it was the open alliance of Seksualiti Merdeka 2011 with the oppositional politics prior to an upcoming general election that provoked the ban.[26] In Pang's opinion the ban was motivated by an intention to curb a larger civil society movement for human rights. Pang says, "Elections are coming up... I suspect it [the ban] is because of the NGOs said in our festival, who had in the past, criticized the government for lack of adherence to human rights. This is an opportunity for certain quarters to attack NGOs for the role they played."

Sexuality and desire exist in a normative space not only as a sexual but as other forms of contestation of power. Metaphorically, Seksualiti Merdeka signifies an expression of national belonging that contests the normative idea of a heterosexual nation-state. Intriguingly, given its public appearance and critical political stance, this annual event had been going on proximately for three consecutive years from 2008 to 2010 without any political interference from either religious authority or incumbent conservative political parties. Apparently, by situating sexuality and desire within the normativities of religious and political difference, queer politics was intrinsically implicated in oppositional politics in Malaysia.

Conclusion

To context the development of queer political identity in a networked society, I first examined how Malaysia's participation in the informational global economy provided the material conditions for the capital city, Kuala Lumpur to transform into an emerging "global city" in Southeast Asia. This process resulted from the export-oriented industries that began in the 1970s and continued with the launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor Project in the 1990s. In line with Henri Lefebvre's idea of the production of space as social relationships (1984:85)[27], this paper argues that recent developments in informational global economies, coupled with the intensive proliferation of networking technologies, have created the material conditions for the capital city, Kuala Lumpur, to become part of the global city network.

---

[26] However, some regarded the perceived threats of oppositional politics prior to the upcoming general election in which Seksualiti Merdeka had invited the chairperson of the Coalition for Clean and Fair Election (BERSIH 2.0), Datuk Ambiga Sreevanasan, to officiate the launch of the sexual rights festival.

[27] According to Lefebvre (1984:85), the meaning of production is "produced as such, cannot be separated from either the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society." Lefebvre, Henri (1984) "Social Space", *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing.

In Part II, I demonstrated that Saskia Sassen's work on global connectivity and Manuel Castell's work on network society have contributed critical insights to explain how Kuala Lumpur's technological infrastructure, not only created networking structures for facilitating the informational global economy, but also facilitated the emergence of virtual space for Queer politics to take off. As attested by Manuel Castells,

> The convergence of social evolution and information technologies has created new material for the performance of activities throughout the social structure. This material basis, built in networks, earmarks dominant social processes, thus shaping social structure itself. (Castells 2010:502)

In Malaysia, information technologies, especially allowed social processes to accelerate, shaping a digitized social structure that outstripped the prevailing conservatism of the beginning political and religious structure in the country. In the late 1990s, Malaysian queers used listserves and websites or webzines for forum and community building. However, openness of the networking structures and moral policing with the rise of Islamist fundamentalism simultaneously occurred in digital spaces as well. The examples of "Seksualiti Merdeka" (2008-2011) and the "It Gets Better Malaysia Project" in 2010 demonstrated that rising political homophobia in Malaysia was reflected through Islamist policing of digital spaces.

In Part III, I describe the rise of *Pengkids* sub-culture and the ways that Islamist moral policing affected and continues to affect the lived experience of Malaysia's queer communities. Since Malaysia's independence from the British, the urbanization and industrialization processes during the modernization and globalization period of Malaysia have contributed to providing more social spaces for young people to engage in social activities in public, and more work opportunities for them in the cities. In such an enabling environment, the increasing mobility of young people during the era of modernization also motivated and facilitated the movement or migration of people of same-sex desires from the nearby rural areas or other cities to Kuala Lumpur. While feminist economic geographers, J.K Gibson-Graham (Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson) regarded Queer perspective as tool to unsettle the narrative of global commodification of culture (Gibson-Graham 1996:144), my research on the lived experiences of the *Pengkids* and their girlfriends demonstrated a re-appropration of culture through the Malaysian queers' use of popular culture that was circulated by the structures of informational global economy.

My finding about *Pengkids* correspond with Michael Peletz's (2002) study of (male) transgenderism in modern Malaysia in which he posited that the New Economy Policy of 1970 indirectly facilitated the large-scale movement of young people in Malaysia, especially the Malay Muslim ethnic group. Although not the direct subject of my research, these transgendered males, are part of the targeted queer population who experience Islamist policing and abuse. The political Islamization and moral policing in Malaysia show a parallel to Tom Boellstorff's study of the emergence of political homophobia in Indonesia as attested by him, "political homophobia highlights how postcolonial heteronormative sexuality is shaped by the state," and how the appearance of same-sex desires in public sphere "threaten this heteronormative logic of national belonging." (Boelldtorff 2007:166-167)

Using "dubbing culture" and "inconsummensurability" to model and describe the phenomena queer politics within Malaysia's Islamic culture. The discrepancy between Islamic authorities and the Malaysian Muslim queers's transgender practices and same-sex desires that were demonstrated in the "Seksualiti Merdeka", "It Gets Better Malaysia Project", and the lived experiences of *Pengkids* and their girlfriends in Malaysia highlight the intersection of religion, sexual desires, national belonging and globalization in Malaysia. Even though Islam is not legislated and practiced the same way in neighboring Indonesia, I found that Tom Boellstorff's work on "dubbing culture", originally descriptive of Indonesia, resonates with my own theorizing of Malaysian political homophobia. In addressing fundamentally conflicting understandings of

Islam and same-sex desire in Indonesia, Boellstorff developed "dubbing culture" as a theoretical metaphor building on Elizabeth Povinelli's work on "incommensurability" - the inevitable distorted translations between "two systems of thought, language and culture." (Boellstorff 2007:139). The "two systems" I contrast here are digitized queerness and lived queerness in Malaysia's Islamic culture. Global connections have intensified and accelerated social transformations, giving rise to the incommensurability of developing queer politics and growing political homophobia. The conditions described in this paper participate in the larger, world-wide paradox of rising sexual openness and growing religious fundamentalism. By studying incommensurabilities as they exist now in Malaysia, we can theorize and , hofully enact future spaces.

Bibliography

Aurigi, Alessandro. "Digital City or Urban Simulator?", In T. Ishida, K. Isbister (ed), *Digital Cities*, LNCS 1765, ppp.33-44/© Springer-Verlag Berlin Heiberg, 2000.

Bamadhaj, Nadiah. "The Hot Potato: Sexuality Rights Advocacy in Malaysia." In *Saksi*, January, 1999.

Barr, Michael D. *Cultural Politics and Asian Values: The Tepid War*. London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002.

Blackwood, Evelyn and Saskia E. Wieringa. *Female Desires: Same-Sex Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Boellstorff, Tom. *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007.

Boellstorff, Tom. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*. Princeton, New Jersey and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Boellstorff, Tom. "Dubbing Culture: Indonesian Gay and Lesbi Subjectivities and Ethnography in an already Globalized World." In *American Ethnologies*, Volume 30. Number 2, May 2003.

Buechler, Simone. "Deciphering the Local in a Global Neoliberal Age: Three Favelas in Sao Paulo, Brazil". In Sassen, Saskia (ed). *Deciphering the Global" Its Scales, Spaces, and Subjects*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

Castells, Manuel. *The Rise of The Network Society*, 2nd Edition, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000, 2010.

D'Emilio, John..*Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986.

Duncan, Nancy (ed). *BodySpace*. Routledge, London and New York, 1996.

Duncan, Nancy. "Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality in Public and Private Spaces." In Duncan, Nancy. ed. *Bodyspace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Faruqi, Shad Saleem. "Jurisdiction of State Authorities To Punish Offences Against The Precepts Of Islam: A Constitutional Perspective." Unpublished research report commissioned by Sisters In Islam (SIS), 2005.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage/Random House, 1973.

Fuss, Diana. "Inside/Out." In Diana Fuss. ed. *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. New York and London: Routledge, 1991.

Gibson-Graham, J. K. *The End of Capitalism (as We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Lived Spatiality: The Spaces of Corporeal Desire", "Cyberspace, Virtuality, and the Real," *Architecture From The Outside: Essays On Virtual and Real Space*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2001.

Grozs, Elizabeth. 'Bodies-cities' in COLOMINA, B. (ed): *Sexuality and Space*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1992.

Halberstam, Judith. "Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies". In *A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York and London: New York University Press, 2005.

Heidegger, Martin. "The Question Concerning Technology," In *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977.

Hemmings, Clare. "Introduction." *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Jenks, Chris. *Transgression*. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.

Lefebvre, Henri. "Social Space", *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, Malden, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 1984.

Marin, Malu. *Stolen Strands: The In and Out Lives of Lesbians in the Philippines*. In *Reinfelder*, 1996.

Mezzadra, Sandro and Neilson, Brett. 'Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor', *Transversal*, 2008.

Mitchell, Don. "The End of Public Space? People's Park: Definitions of the Public and Democracy." In *Annals of the Association of American Gegraphers* 85(1): 108-133, 1995.

Ong, Aihwa. "Introduction: The Act of Being Global". In Roy, Ananya and Aihwa Ong (ed). *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global*. Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

Ong, Aihwa. "The Modern Corporation: Manufacturing Gender Hierarchy", *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*. Albany: SUNY Press. P.143, 1998, 2010.

Ong, Aihwa. "Ecologies of Expertise: Assembling Flows". In Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier (ed), *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics As Anthropological Problems*. MA, Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Ong, Aihwa. "Introduction." In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Peletz, Michael G. Producing Good Subjects, ""Asian Values," and New Types of Criminality."
In *Islamic Modern: Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia*, Princeton and Oxford:
Princeton University Press, 2002.

Peletz, Michael G. "Transgenderism and Gender Pluralism in Southeast Asia since Early Modern
Times." In *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 47, No. 2, April 2006, The University of Chicago Press,
2006.

Rais Nur and A. R. "Queering the State: Towards a Lesbian Movement in Malaysia." In Monika
Reinfelder (ed), *Amazon to Zami: Towards A Global Lesbian Feminism*. London and New York:
Cassell, 1996.

Roy, Ananya and Aihwa Ong (ed). *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being
Global*. Wiley Blackwell, 2011.

Sassen, Saskia (ed). *Deciphering the Global: Its Scales, Spaces, and Subjects*. New York and
London: Routledge, 2007.

Sassen, Saskia. "Local Actors in Global Politics". In *Current Sociology*, July 2004, Vol.
52(4):649-670, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi: SAGE Publications. P.650, 2004.

Saskia Sassen (ed). *Global Networks: Linked Cities*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Sassen, Saskia. "Locating Cities On Global Circuits". In *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol 14,
No. 1, April 2002. P. 13-22, 2002.

Sassen, Saskia. *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton
University Press, 1991, 2001.

Sassen, Saskia. *Globalization and Its Discontent: Essays on the New Mobility of People and
Money*. New York: New Press, 1998.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Epistemology of the Closet*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf,
1991.

Sinnott, Megan J. *Toms and Dees: Transgender Identity and Female Same-Sex Relationships In
Thailand*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.

Tan, Beng Hui. "Women's Sexuality and the Discourse on Asian Values: Cross-Dressing in
Malaysia." In Evelyn Blackwood and Saskia E. Wieringa (ed), *Female Desires: Same-Sex
Relations and Transgender Practices Across Cultures*, New York: Columbia University Press,
1999.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton and
Oxford: Princeton University Press. P.i, 2005.

Warner, Michael. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Minnesota Press. P.
xxvi, 1993.

Wong, Yuenmei, "Islam, sexuality and the marginal positioning of Pengkids and their girlfriends
in Malaysia." In *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. WJLS #681267, VOL 16, ISS 4, 2012.

Wong, Yuenmei. "Rights of Vulnerable Groups: The Role of SUHAKAM in Furthering LGBT Rights." In *SUHAKAM After 9 Years: Time for SUHAKAM to Regain Public Confidence*. ERA Consumer, Malaysia, 2010.