

Navigating the Homonational Boundaries of Queerness in Sweden

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IN
REVIEW

***Boundaries of Queerness.
Homonationalism and
Racial Politics in Sweden***

Katharina Kehl

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180 pages. 85.99 GBP

REVIEW

With *Boundaries of Queerness. Homonationalism and Racial Politics in Sweden* (2024), Katharina Kehl offers a timely and thought-provoking analysis of how LGBTQ-friendliness is mobilised as a boundary-making tool in contemporary Sweden. At just 180 pages, the book presents a rich and conceptually ambitious analysis highlighting the entanglements of race, sexuality, and nation in liberal democratic politics, which complicate notions around Swedish exceptionalism. With a clear normative commitment to social justice and a careful engagement with existing theoretical debates, Kehl (2024: 7) moves the discussion on homonationalism forward by focusing less on what it *is* and more on what it *does*.

QUEER BELONGING IN THE NATION

Kehl's central thesis is that LGBTQ rights discourses in Sweden – often framed through a national self-understanding of exceptional progressiveness – are used as 'boundary markers' (2), delineating the "right kind of queer" while marginalizing others.

Kehl offers a dynamic understanding of how norms of queerness are co-constituted through racialization, geopolitics, and gender in Sweden through three empirical case studies: the controversial "Pride Järva" organized by Swedish right-wing populists; the use of rainbow flags alongside Swedish military symbols in promotional campaigns; and the Instagram narratives of racialized queer activists in Sweden. These case studies illustrate how queer visibility, pride, and belonging are never neutral, but are instead always shaped by broader regimes of inclusion and exclusion. Importantly, Kehl does not shy away from asking difficult questions: When queerness is framed through national pride and security, whose queerness is being protected and whose is being erased?

Drawing on the concept of homonationalism as developed by Jasbir K. Puar (2007), Kehl is attentive to how racialized subjects, especially those read as Muslim, are positioned within or excluded from, the boundaries of national belonging. By reorienting the analytical lens to examine *what homonationalism*

does, rather than merely diagnosing it, Kehl follows Puar's (2017) proposition of carefully translating homonational tendencies to a new locality. With this, Kehl adds to the growing literature of homonationalism in Scandinavia and specifically Sweden (e.g., Lagerman, 2024; Liinason, 2023). Rather than an analysis of national politics, Kehl draws out homonationalism on different scales of being positioned within Swedish society.

BOUNDARY MAKING AND BINARIES

One of the most compelling aspects of the book is its sustained theoretical attention to questions of belonging and (un)intelligibility. In the tension between potentially wanting to be recognised, while simultaneously being rendered unintelligible through the workings of racialisation, Kehl asks: "Now, finding yourself to be fundamentally unintelligible within a certain context, a community of belonging, a process of boundary making – is that the experience of ultimate violence, or ultimate freedom?" (2024: 42). Throughout the different chapters of the book, Kehl sensibly demonstrates that the answer to this question hinges on the intersecting positionalities of those navigating this exact tension.

The metaphors of 'boundaries' and 'borders' allow Kehl to analyse how processes of racialized exclusion operate even within discourses of inclusion. However, they also introduce certain tensions of their own. While Kehl explicitly acknowledges the instability of boundary-making practices (8), one might question whether the continued reliance on metaphors of boundaries and borders inadvertently reifies the binaries the book seeks to unsettle. As Kehl herself notes, "boundary making and belonging are frequently more complex, ambivalent and contested than the obvious either-or binaries it promotes" (36). At the same time, the book occasionally revisits binary frameworks, for instance, when asking "on which side of the imagined boundary we will be placed" (32)? These are moments where the analysis could have benefited from a more nuanced departure from binary frameworks.

ETHICAL REFLEXIVITY AND METHODOLOGICAL LIMITS

Methodologically, the book is marked by ethical sensitivity and a thoughtful feminist and queer positionality. Kehl is transparent about the challenges of researching marginalized communities without appropriating their voices. This leads to a reliance on public, digital narratives, particularly Instagram posts shared by racialized LGBTQ activists, instead of direct interviews. While this approach avoids the pitfalls of extractive research, it also means that the book occasionally lacks the depth of first-hand, dialogic engagement. Kehl's decision not to 'give voice to' others aligns with postcolonial critiques of representation, but it also raises difficult questions about how knowledge is produced and circulated in academic settings. Also in this book, "it seems there is no easy way to solve the question of knowledge production in relation to racialized and Othered minorities" (Khwaja, 2023: 183).

A TIMELY AND THOUGHTFUL CONTRIBUTION

Despite these limitations, *Boundaries of Queerness* is an important and generative book. Its conceptual rigor, ethical care, and political urgency make it a valuable resource for scholars in queer studies, international relations, political science, and critical race theory. Kehl's insistence that we must critically interrogate the conditions under which queerness becomes legible or illegible, and for whom, is a necessary intervention in ongoing debates about inclusion, citizenship, and recognition. Kehl presents compelling empirical material and analyses it with great theoretical depth. For scholars and students looking to understand how sexuality, race, and nationalism intersect in the making of modern Europe, *Boundaries of Queerness* will offer important insights.

In a moment when LGBTQ rights are both weaponized by the far-right and under attack globally, *also* in Scandinavia (Alm & Engebretsen Lund, 2022), Kehl's analysis offers a crucial reminder: visibility is not always liberation, and rights do not guarantee freedom for all. Therefore, Kehl concludes: "Carving out liveable queer lives for ourselves in this situation might require, if nothing else, an acute awareness of the many ambiguities and contingencies that undermine *any* absolute claim to coherence of such attempts at delineating belonging." (Kehl, 2024: 137)

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