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# Introduction – Here versus There: Beyond comparison in queer and sexuality politics

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## Abstract

This special issue explores the simplification of common narratives that have developed in the wake of changing sexual and gender politics in the early part of the 21st Century into binarised narratives of a ‘here’ where sexual politics are ‘sorted’ and a ‘there’ which must ‘catch up’. In this introduction, we reflect on the challenges of attending to the historical, material, political and legal forces that give ‘here’ and ‘there’ geopolitical, discursive and geographic coherence, and discuss how the papers in the special issue explore, challenge and contest the dynamics that underpin the construction of ‘Here versus There’.

## Keywords

here vs there, LGBTQI+ rights, sexual geopolitics

This Here versus There special issue is underpinned by a desire to challenge, explore and reimagine common narratives that have developed in the wake of changing sexual and gender politics in the early part of the 21st Century. These changes are diversely felt in terms of legislative, social and cultural changes (Manalansan IV, 2005; Rao, 2015; Savcı, 2016; Shah, 2015; Weeks, 2018) as well as in terms of normativities (Duggan, 2002). Yet, the complexity and nuance of these diverse effects are often lost or caught up in simpler and more binarised narratives of a ‘here’ where sexual politics are ‘sorted’ and a ‘there’ which has yet to catch up. Most often, the measure of where a state or region belongs in this binary is geographical<sup>1</sup> or legal.<sup>2</sup> Whilst there is an excellent discussion of the geotemporalities that query Global North versions of linear sexual politics (see Kulpa and Mizielinska, 2011; Ni Mhaioileoin, 2019; Weber, 2016) and critiques of Global North/Global South hierarchies (Banerjea and Browne, 2018; Charania, 2017; Rao, 2014; Savcı, 2016), the geopolitical and everyday relational constitution of sexual and gender politics that draws on and contests geographical imaginings of progress/backwardness remains a

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rich and vital site of investigation. The papers in this special issue speak directly to this problematic.

Our discussion of 'Here versus There' began with a set of shared observations, drawn from our different disciplinary backgrounds, about the ubiquity of geopolitical binaries and geographical imaginings of here and there within LGBTQ+ politics (Lalor and Browne, 2018). Numerous unacknowledged political, legal, social and cultural consequences followed from the repetition of this binary. A 'tale of two worlds'<sup>3</sup> was repeated from parliamentary debates, to Pride marches and beyond. As such the 'here' of the 'civilised' 'progressive' Global North and 'there' of the 'backwards' Global South are interconnected geographical imaginings (Mizelińska and Kulpa, 2011). But these imaginings have ongoing material and political effects. Perhaps most notably, national identity and a state's position in geopolitical orderings has been tied to attitudes towards sexual and gender minorities (Puar, 2007; Rao, 2014; Gross, 2017). On a global scale, this geopolitical arrangement leads to a variety of consequences including pinkwashing (eg Gross, 2015), immigration policies in which supposed hostility to queer minorities is used to exclude those from particular states or regions of the world<sup>4</sup>, and forms of aid and political conditionality tied to a state's attitude to LGBTQ+ rights.<sup>5</sup> Domestically, scholars from the 'backwards' Global South have explored the political utility of anti-homosexuality for administrations who wish to scapegoat or distract from domestic failures through reference to the foreign import of homosexuality (see Nyanzi and Karamagi, 2015; Phillips, 1997). Equally, legal 'progress' in the Global North, usually in the form of marriage or equality legislation, can distract from ongoing marginalisation or suffering of vulnerable queer individuals and groups (Browne et al., 2021), or indeed from direct opposition and contestation of changes to legislations and cultures (Nash and Browne, 2020).

Geopolitical binaries of Here versus There map very clearly onto much older civilisational discourses deployed by imperial powers (Anghie, 2007; McClintock, 1995; Weber, 2016). Just as with the civilising discourse of empire (Gupta, 2008; Kirby, 2013; Spivak, 2010), sexual politics becomes a means by which hierarchies are established and repeated (Lalor, 2021). These hierarchies are central to global and local deployments of LGBTQ+ rights. We agree with Cheryl Overs (2016) however, that 'behind the frontlines' of these hierarchical divisions, the situation is much more complex. There is no doubt that there are stark differences between the material situations, as well as the legal regulation of queer lives in different parts of the world, with some facing much more dangerous, challenging or marginalising circumstances. But simple divisions of Here versus There do not accurately capture the complexity of queer lives, legislative enactments or oppositions to LGBTQ+ existences. Nor indeed does legislation or policy exactly map onto imagined geographies of queer freedom or suppression: legislation can be ignored, never to be implemented (see Browne et al., 2021) and LGBTQ+ legislative 'progress' can be contested in various ways in places that have been 'won'. For example, there has been a recent wave of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and rhetoric in some US states (Levin and Kamal, 2021; Popat and Honderich, 2022) and in Canada and Great Britain contestations of LGBT equalities take various forms to reiterate heteronormative orders (Nash and Browne, 2020). Similarly, in a recent Council of Europe report, the UK, along with

Hungary, Poland, the Russian Federation, and Turkey are identified as countries of concern with respect to the protections of LGBTQ+ individuals and groups ([Council of Europe, 2021](#)). This paints a much more complex picture, especially when placed alongside successful strategic litigation in states such as Botswana ([Chingono, 2021](#); [Motshidiemang v Attorney General \[2022\]](#)) or India ([Suresh Kumar Koushal v Naz Foundation \[2014\]](#); [National Legal Services Authority v Union of India \[2014\]](#)). The paradox therefore is one in which even when material, political or legal developments challenge or even undermine simplified binaries of Here versus There, these binaries persist as geopolitical imaginaries, organisational hierarchies and political imperatives, which all inform daily lives. The papers in this special issue do not only reflect on how this occurs, what the effects are and why this might be, but consider carefully how LGBTQ+ politics and lives might be otherwise.

## The papers

Following our initial engagement with the themes of ‘Here versus There’, we expanded the conversation to a workshop which took place at Maynooth University in 2019, funded by Maynooth University and the Socio-Legal Studies Association (SLSA). Over the course of the two-day workshop, a nuanced conversation on the complexities of here versus there developed. A number of key and critical points emerged from these conversations and from the subsequent papers.

First, it is important to note that even though our original thinking about Here versus There was geopolitical, exploring the dynamics of Global North versus Global South, the dichotomy of here and there goes far beyond this. It is manifested and challenged at different scales, from the personal or interpersonal, as Kate Thomas explores in her visual essay and commentary, to the local or the neighbourhood scale, as Alessandro Boussalem shows in an exploration of LGBTQ people of a Muslim background in different areas of Brussels. Discourses of national identity, with varying degrees of nuance and accuracy, create this binary as both Emil Edenborg and Alexander Kondakov explore in their papers on the Russian state’s turn to traditional values and on how Russian legislation compares with that of Ireland. Finally, Mariza Avgeri’s commentary and film work demonstrate how binary divisions of Global North and South permeate international law as those seeking asylum on the basis of gender and sexuality are often required to operationalise discourses of here and there in order to emphasise their vulnerability and secure refugee status. In these papers, it is notable that some of the strongest examples of resistance to the binary of Here versus There come not from geopolitics or law, but through the materiality of lived lives. The complexities of material existence and sexual and gendered embodiment in different spaces are a stark challenge to preconceptions of Here versus There. This comes through very strongly in Alessandro Boussalem’s consideration of neighbourhoods in Brussels. Equally however, it comes through the creative work of the special issue—the film (Mariza Avgeri) and art (Kate Thomas) that pushes beyond the universals of rights, to individual embodied experiences and the singular voices through which those experiences are recounted.

Second, the papers foreground the necessity of attending to the spatial, cultural and political context in which different behaviours, terminology, or practices of meaning making are deployed in relation to Here versus There. At his opening keynote at the Here versus There workshop at Maynooth University, Rahul Rao complicated the homonationalist dynamics that are inherent in binaries of here and there. His keynote, 'Here, there, and here again: circuits of influence in global queer politics' drew upon his research in Uganda to complicate the way in which 'homophobia' and 'LGBT-friendliness' are located in particular spaces, and the way in which activists in Uganda have themselves worked to complicate simplistic binary narratives (see also [Rao, 2020](#)). In a similar vein, papers in this special issue work to take a nuanced, contextualised approach to the deployment of Here versus There and the reasons for this deployment. Notable in this respect is the paper of the second keynote speaker, Niharika Banerjee, which explores homopopulism in India. In this keynote and paper, homopoulism emerges as a new constellation or political relationality in which the inclusion and exclusion of LGBTQ+ people is mobilised in certain (and often very limiting) ways through populist discourses. Emil Edenborg explores the way in which the deployment of traditional values in Russia is complicated by homonationalist engagements with Chechnya and in relation to Muslim 'others'. In contrast however, both Mia Liinason's and Mariza Avgeri's papers show how homonationalist binaries of Here versus There might be strategically deployed rather than complicated: in order to achieve activist goals or to support a claim for asylum, the differences between states or regions might be emphasised in search of a particular strategic goal. In this sense, the papers in the special issue show how while Here versus There might first appear as coherent and stable, on closer inspection it rests upon a constantly shifting terrain. In different locations and circumstances, it is resisted by also deployed, re-configured, picked up and put down at certain moments. One key contribution of this collection is to recognise when, how and why this occurs.

Third, many of the papers in the special issue work to challenge the structuring 'maps' of Here versus There/LGBTQ+ friendliness/homophobia that can be fixed and represented in cartographic form. At the workshop, Rahul Rao's keynote discussed 'circuits of influence' conjuring the image of relational flows, as opposed to the static locations and border crossings of Here versus There. This theme is continued within the collection, either through different or non-traditional engagements with the map (and legal moments on that map) (Alexander Kondakov and Kate Thomas) or by seeking to give form to the stories of those who have moved from there to here (Mariza Avgeri). Many of the papers demonstrate the role of law and particularly the growth of international LGBT rights in simplifying maps of Here versus There, but as Alexander Kondakov shows, law too, is subject to simplifying and structuring assumptions. Indeed, as Kondakov shows, legislative progress is only part of the issue here: two states might have very similar laws, but occupy very different political and legal imaginaries in a space of there or here.

Finally, the papers in the collection and at the workshop operate as an apt demonstration of [Valverde's \(2009, 2015\)](#) reminder that the spatial is also temporal. Thus, Rao's recent work explores how time matters differently in queer postcolonialities ([Rao, 2020](#)). Similarly, at the workshop, Louise Sarsfeld Collins explored how this has always been the case and that colonial criminalisations of sodomy have travelled and mattered differently

in different times in different African states. Other papers in the collection and at the workshop show how global narratives of progress, such as those explored by Cynthia Weber (2016), are rendered much more complex when one zooms in on particular locations. The Here of the Global North is not simply 'ahead' of the Global South, which must 'catch up'. For example, at the workshop, Diana Manesi's paper explored the memories of activists Greece, which has a very different queer history. Her paper engaged with the tensions that arose between activist experience, European narratives of LGBT rights and new Greek legislation that sought to align with EU requirements. The situation that was presented in her paper was not one of a state that occupied one side of a Here versus There binary, in that it was either behind and needed to catch up, or that it had already 'progressed', but one with a history, communities and law that could not be easily transposed onto universalised temporal narratives of LGBTQ+ progress. This is also the case in both Kondakov and Edenberg's papers, which both engage in very different ways with Russian queer pasts and presents and the Russian championing of traditional values, which on first glance the references to tradition might seem a simple reiteration of the temporalities of Here versus There, but as Edenberg shows, the material reality of tradition and modernity in Russia are much more complicated – an argument echoed in Kondakov's comparative analysis of legislative progress.

### *Final thoughts*

Any special issue can only offer a snapshot, rather than a comprehensive vision or overview. This special issue augments ongoing discussions of progress/backward narratives that can come to define sexual and gendered politics, adding the discussion, conceptualisation and empirical considerations of Here versus There.

The geographical realities of academia at the time when the Here vs There conference took place also limits the scope of the Special Issue. We are scholars based in Ireland and the UK, with the workshop taking place in Ireland, pre-COVID-19 and thus prior to the technological shifts that have allowed for somewhat greater online and global participation in academic events. We were able to secure SLSA funding to invite Dr Niharika Banerjea from Ambedkar University in India to deliver a keynote address and then a second seminar in the UK, along with some bursary funding for participants, but there were financial and geographic limitations on who could be at the workshop and thus contribute to the special issue. It is likely that had we held the event a couple of years later, the advent of online participation might have allowed different forms of participation from across the globe.

As it stands however, although the presentations at the workshop ranged widely, with Rahul Rao's keynote focusing on the work of Ugandan activists, with papers spanning from India, to Russia, to Ireland, to pre-colonial and colonial Southern Africa, the papers in this special issue, still remain centred within the 'here' of Europe and those who, even when focusing on the 'there', are operating within European borders. This is perhaps also reflection of long histories of imperial knowledge production in which the metropole was the centre of theory production and the periphery the place of data gathering (Connell, 2007, 2015; Narayan, 2019, see also Spivak, 2010; Mignolo, 2009, 2018). Indeed, Jamie

Hagan's presentation at the workshop reflected on the way in which global northern academic institutions continue to capitalise on these dynamics of knowledge production and the resulting experiences of 'international' students. We have tried to counter – or to at least acknowledge – these histories with our choice of keynote speakers, one of whose papers opens this collection. These steps are a recognition of the ongoing coloniality of knowledge production, that is given institutional form in global academic hierarchies, publishing practices, funding networks and providers and immigration regimes that make physical border crossings in pursuit of academic collaboration much easier for those located 'here' rather than 'there' (Fletcher et al., 2017; Russell, 2019; Naqvi and Russell, 2020). Challenging, or even dismantling, the binary of Here versus There demands that we look far beyond sex and gender (although as Spivak (2010) and many others have shown, sex and gender are vital to how we understand geo- and biopolitical hierarchies). Instead, the challenge is to attend to the historical, material, political and legal forces that give 'here' and 'there' geopolitical, discursive and geographic coherence, force and materiality. The papers in this special issue constitute a contribution to this larger conversation and we hope an impetus to keep contesting the power relations that constitute the inequitable dynamics.

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### **Notes**

1. For example, numerous maps of safe and unsafe states have been produced by LGBT rights campaigners (see Rao R. (2014) The locations of homophobia. *London Review of International Law*, 2: 169–199, Rao R. (2020) *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.)
2. Usually through the recognition or rights and protections against discrimination.

3. This exact formulation has been used in UK Parliamentary debates. See HC Deb 26 October 2017, vol 630, col 515
4. For example, the original text of the *Executive Order Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States* Executive Order 13,769 82 FR 8977 (2017) (colloquially known as the ‘Muslim ban’), states ‘the United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred...for those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation.’
5. Seen perhaps most notably in the response to the Ugandan AHA 2014 (see [Jjuuko \(2016\)](#) International Solidarity and its Role in the Fight Against Uganda’s Anti-Homosexuality Bill. In: Lalor K, Mills E, Sánchez García A, et al. (eds) *Gender, Sexuality and Social Justice: What’s law got to do with it?*: Institute of Development Studies, [Jjuuko and Mutesi \(2018\)](#) The multifaceted struggle against the Anti-Homosexuality Act in Uganda. In: Nicol N, Jjuuko A, Lusimbo R, et al. (eds) *Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights: (Neo)colonialism, Neoliberalism, Resistance and Hope*. London Institute of Commonwealth Studies.).

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