
White Supremacy in Rainbow: Global Pride and Black Lives Matter in the Era of COVID

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Abstract

Written in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, this article explores the limits of solidarity between LGBTQ Pride and Black Lives Matter (BLM). In 2020, most Pride events around the world were cancelled due to COVID-19; however, many were reimagined in new forms that centered BLM. Using Global Pride 2020 as a case study of one such event, I argue for an understanding of Pride organizations' cooptation of BLM that extends beyond clichés of performative activism to consider how such solidarities serve to legitimate logics of white supremacy. At a time when global pandemics of disease and racial violence made clear the importance of reimagining existing systems, and radical change became increasingly conceivable to the global public, I question the compatibility between conventional discourses of LGBTQ progress and Black freedom. Specifically, I examine how Pride organizations used the global disruption and devastation of COVID-19 to summon support from the BLM movement while simultaneously perpetuating anti-blackness especially and racialized homonationalisms more generally.

Keywords

white supremacy, Pride, Queer of Colour, BLM, COVID-19

Introduction

In June 2020, a banner emblazoned with the words “Pride is a riot! #BLM” was affixed to the facade of the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Signs like this one were already floating around the internet, stylized in bright colours and ornamental typography, posted on blogs and social media newsfeeds. The message was clear: Pride and Black Lives Matter (BLM) are interrelated social movements. Such messaging suggests that similarities in how each of these movements began, highlighting their founders’ opposition to police brutality, make them naturally complementary. However, the trajectories of each movement have been quite different.

Cities around the world that host Pride tend to benefit from discourses of progress that are associated with the expansion of human rights, the logic of which is rooted in western-centric philosophical thought and maintained by international bodies like the United Nations. Conversely, BLM demonstrations reject progress narratives and tend to be regarded with suspicion and fear. Given these discrepancies in aim and reception, it is important to question what it means when, amidst the cancellation of hundreds of Pride parades and festivals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many were reimaged in new forms that centered BLM. Taking up such questioning, this article offers a critical analysis of one such event, Global Pride 2020, to explore larger issues of solidarity between LGBTQ organizations and Black communities. Particularly informed by the ways that modern gay politics prioritize pragmatism and assimilation to the exclusion of marginalized populations, this article considers how Pride’s recent embrace of BLM seeks to uphold, rather than dismantle, global white supremacy.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of Pride as an institution situated in the larger trajectory of the gay rights movements. I then discuss the reconstruction of Global Pride amid COVID-19. Using this event as a case study, I analyze Pride and BLM movements relationally. I go on to interrogate the meaning of solidarity in

the context of both a global health crisis and a global reckoning with racial violence triggered by the murder of George Floyd. Pushing back against easy solidarities, I treat the circumstances of Pride’s newfound interest in BLM as a site of precarity and I analyze their relationship from a perspective that considers the ways that non-existence is actively produced to normalize logics of oppression. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of Pride’s discursive practices that limit visions of Black futures, pasts, and presents.

A brief background

The Stonewall Riots of 1969 are typically viewed as the spark that lit the fire of gay rights liberation around the world (Bain, 2016; Bruce, 2016). Often referred to as ‘Stonewall’, these riots were a series of public demonstrations held in response to the violent policing of LGBTQ folx, especially Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (QTBIPOC). The week-long uprising followed an early morning police raid of New York City’s Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969, and its momentum has since been attributed to butch and trans Black and Brown women, such as Stormé DeLarverie, Marsha P. Johnson, and Sylvia Rivera, who went on to cofound the Gay Liberation Front. This fact, that the movement for gay liberation was ignited by trans and gender nonbinary women of colour, is increasingly regarded as both a significant historical contribution and a glaring historical omission by QTBIPOC scholars.

It should be noted, however, that Stonewall was not a “universal moment of liberatory social change”, even if it is often regarded as such due to “the homogenizing tendencies of certain processes of globalization” (Puar, 2002, p. 1061). Such Americentric histories tend to occlude the variable outcomes of rights-based western development projects that originate in the Global North, both across (Greensmith & Giwa, 2013; Dhoot, 2015; Bain, 2016) and beyond (Puar, 2002; Gentile & Kinsman, 2015) the region. Nevertheless, the first gay pride marches in the United States were held to commemorate the first anniversary of Stonewall in 1970 (Bruce, 2016).

Radical activists of New York City's Gay Liberation Front (GLF) organized an event originally called "Christopher Street Liberation Day" and encouraged similar organizations across the country to hold parallel demonstrations (Bruce, 2016). Organizers in Los Angeles heeded the GLF's call by planning a parade called "Christopher Street West". Though different, these events had the same goal: "proclaiming the cultural worth and dignity of gays and lesbians" (Bruce, 2016, p. 32). These June 28 demonstrations would later come to be known to the world as Pride Parades, and, eventually, just Pride.

In the 50 years since Christopher Street Liberation Day and Christopher Street West, many more cities in the United States, and in other parts of the world, have begun hosting their own Pride celebrations. For example, in 2019, it was estimated that over 1,500 Pride events were held globally (Evans, 2020). As a result, Pride has become a strategic site of marketing where many corporations invest millions to attract the lucrative "pink dollar" (Coon, 2012; also see; Greensmith & Giwa, 2013; Gentile & Kinsman, 2015; Bain, 2016). This has been referred to in activist circles as "pink-washing", a practice through which businesses, cities, and nation-states, market themselves as uniquely tolerant of homosexuality, and thus cosmopolitan, developed, and democratic, to promote and conceal the larger colonial and imperial formations through which they are constituted (Puar, 2014). The potential for profit through pink-washing is clear, as CNBC reports that, in a single month, 2019's Pride festivities brought hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue to just the businesses of New York City (Evans, 2020).

In 2020, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pride-related revenue trends were markedly different than years prior as most events were canceled. Nonetheless, the profitization of Pride is a well demonstrated phenomenon that not only disproportionately harms QTBIPOC, as it slowly pushes them out through economic liberalization and gentrification (Bain, 2016), but similarly erases the historical role that these

communities have played in the creation of Pride and other such queer mobilizations. This becomes particularly clear when we consider modern spectacles of Pride as superficial versions of events past, unrecognizable from the riots that once inspired them. As observed by Nadijah Robinson with Amalia Duncan-Raphael (2018), Pride events have become overtly celebratory, focusing less on activism, and serving more as sites for the strategic branding (or re-branding) of "corporations, police, and other institutions that otherwise play little to no role in generating well-being in queer and trans communities" (p. 215). Further, as Robinson explains, "Festivities [center] primarily around the interests and desires of moneyed white cisgender gay men, while marginalizing or tokenizing the presence of Black and Indigenous people and people of colour" (p. 215). This sidelining of the multiply marginalized members of the LGBTQ community is far from accidental. Rather, it reflects precisely whose interests are now served by Pride: the white and the wealthy.

Analysis and findings

Global Pride 2020

"Pride season isn't canceled. It's moving online," an LGBTQ news outlet proclaimed in April of 2020 (Marr, 2020, para 1). After the majority of Pride events were canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a coalition of Pride organizations across the world decided to organize a virtual event called Global Pride 2020. On the event website, Global Pride is described as a collaboration between Interpride (an organization that promotes Pride on an international level by linking national Pride organizations), the European Pride Organizers Association, the US Association of Prides, Orgullo Latin America, and many other national and regional groups (Global Pride 2020, 2020a, para 1). The event took place on June 27, 2020 and reached over 57 million viewers in at least 163 countries during its "27-hour virtual parade" (Global Pride 2020, 2020b, para 1).

In multiple press statements leading up to and following Global Pride 2020, event organizers

declared a commitment to “amplifying black voices across the world” (Global Pride 2020, 2020c, para 2; see also Wareham, 2020, Global Pride 2020, 2020b). As Global Pride organizer Steve Taylor explained to *Forbes* Magazine, “It’s only right that we use Global Pride to raise the voice of people of color from within our community, and so many Prides have already provided content that really shouts the Black Lives Matter message loud and clear” (Wareham, 2020, para 7). However, this commitment seems rather hollow when the lineup of scheduled guests is considered. Though Alicia Garza, a co-founder of BLM, was featured during one of the “main stage” segments of the event, she was one of only seven Black voices heard during the entire 27-hour livestream (Global Pride 2020, 2020b).

Over 70 musicians, activists, and politicians made appearances, performed, and gave speeches, including several sitting presidents and prime ministers of white settler nation states. Of particular note, is the United States’ President Joe Biden, then a presidential candidate. In his speech, Biden assured viewers around the world that the United States of America would “once again become a beacon of hope for LGBTQ people” (2020, 00:53). This statement stands out for several reasons. It overlooks the long-established historical dissonance between aspirations of mainstream, often white, lesbian and gay politics and the lived realities of Black queer and trans folx in the US and elsewhere—realities which US imperialism has played a central role in shaping (Puar, 2017). Further, and relatedly, Biden’s politics and policies are well-known among social justice advocates, both under his own administration and formerly under Barrack Obama’s, for being pro-police, anti-Black, and for concealing these facts by tokenizing Black and other non-white people.

Global Pride’s tying together of nationalist ideologies with notions of LGBTQ rights is fraught with danger for non-normative sexual subjects, including, if not especially QTBIPOC, whose full membership within a given polity is precluded by something that Jasbir Puar (2017) has referred to as homonationalism.

Homonationalism, or national homonormativity, refers to the process through which sexual subjects are formed in relation to the state, which simultaneously uplifts those who conform to normative racial, gender, and socioeconomic ideals, while reinforcing the scaffolding of systems that discriminate against and exploit those deemed *Other*. As an analytic, homonationalism is used to understand and critique how mainstream LGBTQ politics, and movements like Pride, are implicated in furthering nation-states’ disciplinary agendas, producing racialized understandings of respectability that are unconstrained by borders. Through this lens, we can see how, in the name of progress, Pride has become yet another global institution that enforces identity norms based on hegemonic whiteness, thereby putting it, not in line, but at odds, with the politics and practices of the BLM movement.

Mobilization in context

As impressive as Pride’s growth over the past half century may seem, the pace of the BLM movement’s growth in 2020 is stunning in comparison. Following the viral murder of George Floyd on May 26, 2020, an estimated 26 million individuals participated in BLM demonstrations in the United States alone (Buchanan et al., 2020). Just between May and July of 2020, there were over 4,700 BLM demonstrations in the United States, and over 3,600 cities and towns around the world were host to such events (Buchanan et al., 2020; Bliss, 2020). Some have speculated that the public’s increased engagement with political activism following the election of President Donald Trump in the United States has led more people to participate in protests related to injustice and inequalities of race, gender, immigration, etc. (Jordan & Clement, 2018). However, this does not fully account for the rapid proliferation of demonstrations outside of the US, nor does this account for the fact that much of the increased activism occurred in the immediate wake of COVID-19.

Given that increased engagement in public

protest cannot be explained simply by the appointment of a single politician in just one country, it may be useful to consider the rising interest in social justice in relation to the unusual circumstances of the 2020 pandemic. Dr. Daniel Q. Gillion, a political scientist and professor at the University of Pennsylvania, addressed this directly in a statement to the New York Times, stating that:

With being home and not being able to do as much, that might be amplifying something that is already sort of critical, something that's already a powerful catalyst, and that is the video. If you aren't moved by the George Floyd video, you have nothing in you. And that catalyst can now be amplified by the fact that individuals probably have more time to engage in protest activity (quoted in Buchanan et al., 2020).

Similar sentiments have been expressed by others (Brand, 2020; Wood, 2020; Da Costa, 2021), some of whom have argued that COVID-19 specifically motivated white people to get involved with longstanding social issues, particularly those pertaining to racial violence. In this way, the pandemic and its disruptive effects on ordinary life can be understood as a magnifier for the affective capacity of the visual imagery of police violence in general and of the murder of George Floyd in particular. Coupled with this magnification was the widespread experiences of death, loss, and overall state failure to address COVID-19, which motivated privileged people to get involved with political movements. As observed by Dionne Brand (2020, para 1):

What the COVID-19 pandemic has done is expose even further the endoskeleton of the world. I have felt tremendous irritation at the innocence of those people (mostly, but not only, white) finally up against their historic and present culpability in a set of dreadful politics and dreadful economics – ecocidal and genocidal.

Together, it appears that the above factors effectively mobilized people who, on the one hand, might have otherwise remained distracted by the quotidian practices of pre-pandemic life and, on the other, were previously unaffected by state violence, to begin advocating for BLM. While much of this support was performative and fleeting in nature (Ali & Anane-Bediakoh, 2020), the drastic response to Floyd's murder after COVID-19 versus, for instance, similar state-sanctioned murders of other Black men, like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Philando Castile before COVID-19, suggests that the pandemic had a significant impact on the public's interest in BLM.

For example, those who were roused to action by the plight of BLM in 2020, often assembled in violation of local health and safety protocols that were imposed to slow the progression of the growing coronavirus. At the time, racial violence was beginning to be understood as a pandemic in its own right, warranting immediate attention. Pride, however, did not inspire the same sense of urgency or enthusiasm. Even as many events and festivals were reformulated online, due to jurisdictional restrictions on in-person gatherings, attendance for Pride began to waver across the world. Perhaps this is why, in June of 2020, Los Angeles Pride rebranded itself as the 'All Black Lives Matter' march (Del Barco, 2020). The march was scheduled to run along the same route as the original parade, and its organizers arranged a police escort, a move which revealed their ignorance of BLM's demands for systemic police reform as well as their failure to collaborate with local Black leaders and activists. More than just a simple mistake, this confirms Pride organizations' consistent investment in white supremacy.

Discussion

Solidarity for who?

What does it mean that the momentum of Pride was impeded by a global health crisis while BLM grew and, during this same time, was deemed "the largest movement in U.S. History" (Buchanan et al., 2020, para 3)? Furthermore, does it matter that

support for BLM drew an extraordinary physical presence, while Pride merely aroused passive, virtual engagement? How should we interpret Pride, a shrinking, de-radicalized event, and its decision to embrace BLM at the height of the group's public popularity? Overall, one is left with a glaring question about Pride's choice to embrace BLM and its commitment to Black freedom and racial justice following COVID-19: was this cooptation or solidarity?

In tending to these sorts of questions, David Roediger (2016) prescribes a sober approach to understanding solidarity, something he calls "making solidarity uneasy" (p. 245). To develop his approach, Roediger (2016) reflects on labour movements in the nineteenth century, arguing that whether in the tradition of Durkheim's theoretical work or Marxist thought, "existing patterns of racial divisions and uneven development produced solidarities compromised by their creation within industrial capitalism and imperial expansion" (p. 231). By this rationale, solidarity is made precarious by the conditions under which it is produced. This means that the conditions under which solidarities are forged must be properly vetted to avoid easy solidarities that oppose oppression in one form, while overlooking or perpetuating it in another.

In examining the solidarity project between Global Pride and BLM, we must make solidarity uneasy. Beyond the possibilities of fruitful cooperation, we must also consider whether the goals of these two movements are compatible. Are they imagining of and working towards the same future? These questions are important because building solidarity often demands a unified activist itinerary, which, in the context of the whitestream and in the shadow of white supremacy, tends to result in a prioritization of oppressions that regards competing interests as counterproductive to mutual progress. So, if we are to understand who solidarity is serving and to what end, we must consider not only who has the ability to prioritize oppressions, but also, who is ignored or forgotten in the process. Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2012) sociology of absences is useful in recognizing what such priorities mean

and how they operate. Through the sociology of absences, non-existence is understood as something that is actively produced. Santos (2012) asserts, "Non-existence is produced whenever a certain entity is discredited and considered invisible, non-intelligible or discardable" (p. 52). In the context of solidarities, produced absences result in the naturalization of hierarchies of oppression, thereby reproducing some form of oppression for the sake of resolving another that purports to be more important.

The dearth of Black speakers at Global Pride 2020 is reflective of just this, revealing organizers' priorities as gatekeepers of a subtly oppressive racial regime. In discursive terms, such prioritization appears in Global Pride 2020's three-word tagline: "Exist. Persist. Resist". Not only does this tagline seem quite short-sighted relative to BLM's temporally expansive assertion that Black lives matter in a world ordered by anti-blackness, but that "exist[ence]" is first on the list suggests a passivity that diminishes action-oriented practices of resistance as generative forces of radical change – a staple of much Black activism. With this limited imagination, the ambition to exist can be seen as simply maintaining the status quo. The goal then becomes seeking inclusion in existing (local and global) social orders rather than toppling oppressive regimes, as BLM (and the historical legacies of Black activism that precede it) is ought to do. This discrepancy in ambition is indicative of the generally anemic politics of mainstream LGBTQ movements, which have been the subject of QTBIPOC critique for quite some time (Ferguson, 2004; Muñoz, 2009; Bassichis & Spade, 2014; Bain, 2016).

Unqueer future

Queer of colour scholar José Esteban Muñoz (2009) has argued that gay pragmatic thought constrains possibility. Preoccupation with being ordinary is an anti-utopian desire that not only sacrifices idealistic notions of the future but also excludes from its pragmatic agenda individuals and communities with differential access to capital in its many forms. In short, this

practicality is a trap for revolutionary social movements. The present, in all its boundedness, is not enough. As Muñoz (2009) explains, “[the present] is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations” (p. 27). Similarly, by aiming simply for existence, Pride limits the horizon of possibility for the very people the organization is purportedly striving to liberate.

While it may seem contradictory that organizations established to defend some version of human rights could play an active role in perpetuating inequities, this is a common issue in a world composed of many worlds. By this, I mean to suggest that in contemporary world-systems, which do not necessarily encompass the entire globe, economies, empires, systems, communities, and *movements* can themselves compose disjointed and overlapping lifeworlds (Appadurai, 1996; Wallerstein, 2004; Manfred & Steger, 2019). In this multiplicity of worlds, cultural and economic processes of globalization do not simply occur within or without nation-states, but beyond them at various scales. It is perhaps because of this incoherence that, according to Eve Darian-Smith (2016), instrumental rationality is used to “justify the measuring of essentialized differences between the global north and global south—between the more ‘civilized’ and ‘advanced’ economies and what seems the inherently less sophisticated, less law-abiding, and less progressive emerging economies” (p. 81). These measurements continue to be recognized as legitimate benchmarks of “progress,” despite their logics’ histories in rationalizing human rights violations, ranging from slavery to genocide, based on race and nationality.

The coupling of economic expansion with human rights can make advancing LGBTQ inclusion quite seductive to both state and non-state actors. However, this seduction often conceals a politics that is folded into discourses of development and then monetized in the global system. As Puar (2017) explains, homonationalism serves as a “regulatory script

not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (p. 31). Here, policies of exclusion are adopted to control, manage, and normalize kaleidoscopic variations within municipal and national sexual landscapes, enforcing homonormative ideals and, by extension, the legacy of white supremacy undergirding these ideals. Homonormativity then travels across borders, marking those who fail or refuse to conform as backward, while simultaneously leveraging westernized understandings of progress and development to reinforce hierarchical arrangements of power between nations. As such, this genre of homosexuality is implicated in the western imperial commitment to what Puar (2017) has termed “the global dominant ascendancy of whiteness” (p. 31).

Conclusion

Global pandemics of disease and racial violence have made clear the importance of reimagining existing systems, rendering radical change conceivable on a global scale. As a result, more people than ever are engaging in direct action for a variety of causes, roused by movements like Pride and Black Lives Matter (BLM). While recognizing the societal benefits of political and community action, it remains important to question the limits of solidarity between constituencies whose goals are substantively different and, at times, oppositional. This begs the question: why are Pride organizations using *this* moment, in which COVID-19 has disrupted and devastated large swathes of the globe, to summon support from the BLM movement? We must strive to understand LGBTQ organizations’ cooptation of BLM in a way that extends beyond clichés of performative activism to consider instead how such solidarities can, paradoxically, legitimate logics of white supremacy and perpetuate anti-blackness. Only in doing so can we begin to explore the possibilities for inducing meaningful and transformative change.

Throughout this paper, I have argued that Pride and BLM are incompatible as movements,

as their visions of the future differ both in form and in content. Now, as I bring my analysis to a conclusion, I want to also consider whether solidarity between these movements is, in fact, dangerous. To do so, I return to the message on the sign hung outside of New York City's Stonewall Inn: "Pride is a riot! #BLM." This message, earnest though it may be, reveals a conceptual distinction between the people for whom Pride now exists (white, monied queers), and for whom it does not: Black people. By advocating for the value of Black lives via hashtag, Pride implicitly marks itself as non-Black—in solidarity, not community, with Black communities. In creating this distance, Black communities' access to Pride, as a rights-granting institution, is foreclosed upon. To this point, Bassichis and Spade (2014) extend Jared Sexton's 'People of Color Blindness' (2010) to argue that the tendency in LGBTQ rights advocacy to "analogize other struggles to anti-black racism [...] and to speak generally about 'racism' without attention to the specificities of anti-blackness" is itself anti-Black (p. 194). In other words, by rhetorically posing Pride as non-Black, as outside blackness, Pride is aligned with whiteness and, by extension, anti-blackness.

This articulation of Pride as non-Black is evident in more places than just the facade of the Stonewall Inn. The "centering" of BLM in events like Global Pride (see Del Barco, 2020, for a similar example in Los Angeles) indicates a similar weeding out of blackness. By claiming solidarity with Black struggles, Pride asserts itself as a movement not already in community with Black folx, thereby bracketing itself against blackness. In turn, Pride events set in opposition Black and non-Black queer and trans people, reproducing blackness as a dangerous *Other*. Such othering makes more legible the image of white queer respectability, invoking homonationalist rhetoric and legitimizing their constituency's claim to the many rights that are bound up in whiteness. For these reasons, Prides' recent allyship with BLM does not indicate solidarity with Black struggles; rather, it belies a deep-seated investment in white supremacy.

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Acknowledgments

This paper was inspired by the uncertainty and [somewhat blunted] potential of the summer of 2020. It was the result of research funded by the University of California, Irvine's Graduate Division and would not have been possible without the encouragement and guidance of Dr. Long T. Bui. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Jade Crimson Rose Da Costa and the other editors of this journal for their thoughtful comments, provocations, and edits.

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