(Trans)Cultural Queer (In)Visibility

How Labeling Queer Identity Often Does More Harm Than Good
For Global Queer Communities
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Abstract: Many people often believe that queerness is a Western phenomenon and that the people living in the Western world are more accepting of queer identity. The historical and ideological processes of colonialism and neoliberalism have supported the idea of queerness as Western, and language and labels around queer identity support the same notion. In reading about multilingual queer people's experience, there are two general trends that emerge: 1) people claim that English labels are most useful for articulating queer identity, or that 2) English labels for queer identity are too tied to Western culture. I conclude that, although labeling separate queer identities very often helps individuals feel recognized and accepted, abolishing narrow labeling practices altogether may be necessary to prevent queer identity from being continuously framed as a Western phenomenon. Indeed, since most queer identity labels are coined in English, it is primarily people who speak English who have the ability to articulate who they are. This relegates non-English speakers to the imagined non-queer realm in modern, Western conceptions of thought and makes such people invisible. This paper suggests, also, that moving beyond hegemonic Western narratives of queerness to talk about how people all over the world love, act, and exist rather than identify may be key for queer acceptance and liberation.

Introduction

  When I came out to my parents, I had to send them Urban Dictionary definitions of the labels I use to describe my sexuality. Growing up in California as a child of Bulgarian immigrants, I was raised to speak both English and Bulgarian. Eventually, I grew to speak English better, and it was within that language that I found the terminology to describe my identity. However, since there are no Bulgarian terms to describe my queerness, the unspoken implication of my coming out was that I had become "too American" as a result of my parents moving to the U.S.

  Many people often hold the belief that queerness is Western and that the people living in that part of the world are more accepting of queer identity. While this is true in some cases, making broad generalizations about which parts of the world are homophobic or not is a mistaken claim. In light of this, this essay will seek to answer the question: how does the idea that queerness is a Western phenomenon emerge, and in what ways might it be subverted?

  So far, there have been texts written about separate aspects that contribute to the idea that queerness is Western. For example, scholars have shown how colonial practices created an entirely new system of gender as we understand it and necessitated the erasure of non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Lugones, 2007; Ahuja, 2016), and how the later rise of neoliberalism has made it so that the West now positions itself as accepting of queerness while asserting that the rest of the world needs to change (Puar 2017; Seckingelgin 2018; Rodriguez 2019). While these socio-historical processes set up the stage for how queerness is viewed as "Western," language and labeling practices have propped up the same idea. Researchers have posited that some multilingual queer individuals often resort to English to describe their identities because of the queer terminology made available by that language (Raza-Sheikh 2020). Alternatively, some view English queer labels as intertwined with American culture, and have thus tried to reclaim or create new terminology in their native languages (Manalansan 2007; Gandhi 2020). All in all, this reflects a complicated discourse of transcultural queer identity labels and calls into question whether any identity labeling is useful when trying to subvert narratives of Western dominance.

  This essay synthesizes all these viewpoints into one coherent piece that explores how histories and labeling practices fit together. I argue that, although labeling separate queer identities very often helps individuals feel recognized and accepted, abolishing narrow labeling practices altogether may be necessary to prevent queer identity from being continuously framed as a Western phenomenon.

  First – to situate my argument within a sociohistorical context – I trace histories of colonialism and neoliberalism to uncover how queer identity has been commodified and positioned either as something to be exterminated or as a sign of progress and modernity. I then transition to speaking about the intersection of queerness, multilingualism, and identity labels. This will reveal two patterns that emerge when looking at queer labeling practices, and the essay will conclude with the interrogation of the value of identity labels themselves.

I: Socio-Historical Phenomena & Effect on Queer Discourses

Different sexualities and genders have always existed; it was only that particular identities became normalized and privileged through specific socio-historical processes that served certain, dominant interests. In fact, it might be accurate to say that gender and sexuality as categories that we understand today did not even exist until more modern times, when confining people to such fabricated social realms became a means of controlling populations. That is, 'heterosexuals' and 'homosexuals' did not exist, there were simply people who engaged in certain acts that might be labeled as heterosexual or homosexual. Along these lines, the label of 'queer' is also one that is highly tied up with Western historical and cultural constructions of sexuality, but in the absence of a more inclusive term, I will use the words 'queer' and 'queerness' to broadly describe any non-normative sexual orientation, sexuality, and gender, regardless of whether the people in question identify with the term.[1]

A. Colonialism

Queer people have always existed. It was not until Western European countries colonized territories in the Global South and the Americas that certain bodies were deemed deviant. Colonialism is often defined as a "political and economic system that allows one geopolitical entity [...] to establish controls beyond its traditional geographic borders" to increase profit and power (Ahuja, 2016, p. 237). Moreover, Ahuja (2016) writes that colonial projects of domination are "always accompanied by forms of violence and coercion that attempt to reshape the material worlds of the Indigenous peoples or exterminate them altogether" (p. 242). As a result, colonialism was never purely about land and resources – it involved the fundamental reimagining and restructuring of human societies to be in line with a model of society that was easier to divide and dominate. Clearly-defined categories of people are easier to control, so colonizers imposed measures of identity (race, gender, ability, etc.) to mark who is in power and who is subjugated across various contexts. One way this took shape was in the creation of the gender binary.

María Lugones speaks of the "light" and "dark" sides to the colonial gender system, where the "light side constructs gender and gender relations hegemonically, ordering only the lives of white bourgeois men and women and constituting the modern/colonial meaning of men and women" while the "dark side [...] was and is thoroughly violent" for subjugated populations (2007, p. 206). That is, gender included both the neat, orderly binary that white Europeans imposed upon themselves with values of sexual dimorphism and patriarchy (the light side) as well as the violence inflicted upon the people they colonized in an attempt to mold those other

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[1] This reveals the limitations of language and identity in and of itself to the extent that it can be argued that any term is always connected to the histories and experiences of people who predominantly speak that language. 'Queer' was historically considered a slur for gay people and has since been reclaimed, but this does not absolve it from an inherently Western conception of sexuality and gender. People in other parts of the world have non-normative sexual and gender identities imbued with deep cultural meaning, and labeling them as 'queer' in English does not do them justice. This will be touched upon in section 2 of this essay, but for now, I digress. 'Queer' is the most inclusive word available in English, and I will proceed to use it in this essay, despite recognizing how it, too, is limiting in certain ways.

societies to the European model (the dark side). Of importance to note is that "colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized [societies]," rather, an entirely new system was engendered that created multitudes of different positionalities and reshaped all human and earthly relations (Lugones, 2007, p. 186). As such, different identities held different values across settings.

As a result, gender manifested in different ways depending on the society and role that an individual was expected to fulfill. For example, the gender binary allowed for the division and organization of labor in a way that promoted the economic endeavors of men while simultaneously encouraging the childrearing capacities of women to create more children who could be made into the same type of workers and citizens. This notion of productivity under colonialism made it so that sexuality was narrowed to serve a reproductive purpose, which in turn propped up heterosexuality as an ideal. In line with sexual dimorphism, people with the capability to bear children were more often than not categorized as 'women' while 'men' were the people who controlled the "organization of sex, its resources, and products" (Lugones, 2007, p. 194).[2] This erased nonbinary and queer identities while placing women in a passive, oppressed role and men in an active, powerful role. Returning to the point that clear categorization of people makes populations easier to control: it is no accident that the binary gender distinction (passive vs. active) mirrors what the binary between colonized and colonizer looked like. All this is to say that the extermination of queerness to fit a binary was a colonial tactic for controlling populations.

Yet, binaries are never this simple, which is why looking at lives across intersections of identity is necessary to understand coloniality. For instance, women in colonizer nations versus colonized societies were not imagined in the same way. White women were the "reproducers of 'the (white) race'" while other women were equated to "animals" who were "sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity" (Lugones, 2007, p. 201, 203). It is not difficult, then, to imagine the sort of violence that was inflicted upon colonized women and how it differed from that enacted on European women. This "dark side" of the colonial gender system therefore necessitated the erasure of non-normative bodies and sexualities (i.e. those that did not fit into the "light side" conceptualization of gender) since they were viewed as threatening to the social order.

Through these mechanisms, colonialism effectively created a system that policed and erased queer, nonbinary expressions of gender and sexuality for settler-colonial nation-state building. In these ways, Western European nations established a new social order to rule the rest of the world, erasing queerness to fit people into simple binaries.

B. *Homonationalism & Neoliberalism*

Now, the narrative has seemingly flipped. After centuries of exterminating queerness globally via colonization, the Western world now claims to be protective of queer people. This

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[2] Lugones goes on to note that it is not enough to speak of reproductive biology when speaking of how gender was organized and goes on to point out how intersex people were similarly forced into the gender binary despite having bodies that fundamentally challenged the biological binaristic gender model.

saviorism manifests in a cycle that is ultimately harmful to international queer populations. For example, the most powerful countries use the cover of "rescuing" queer populations abroad to interfere with second and third-world countries' politics (Seckinelgin, 2018, p. 287-288). Seckinelgin's analysis focuses in particular on British foreign aid to various African countries (Uganda, Ghana, and Kenya, among others). He writes of how, in 2011, the British Prime Minister brought the topic of LGBT rights into negotiation discussions of foreign aid to African nations as a sort of "moral evaluation" of whether a country was worthy of their financial aid (2018, p. 287). However, the power imbalance in these discussions was reminiscent of past colonial relations, leading the African leaders to view the mention of LGBTQ rights as "neocolonial interventions" (Seckinelgin, 2018, p. 286). Consequently, to protect the national identities of their respective countries from what they view as foreign influence, African governments adopt anti-LGBTQ stances and deny the existence of queer Africans altogether (Seckinelgin, 2018, p. 293).[3] The process can be described as follows: since the United Kingdom purports to be accepting of queerness and brings LGBTQ+ rights into international discussions, queerness is politicized. Then, when it comes to political negotiations, other governments come to see queer identity as solely political and Western-influenced. As such, in attempting to reject Western influence in their countries, they often take anti-LGBTQ+ positions in their domestic policy, further suppressing the rights and visibility of domestic queer populations, making it even easier for the government to persecute queer people in their country for being a traitor to their national identity (Seckinelgin, 2018, 294). To Western countries, all of this reaffirms the notion that the rest of the world is homophobic and transphobic, and the West can continue pretending to be a haven for LGBTQ populations by offering the bare minimum of rights. This harmful cycle just erases the voices of actual queer people across the globe.[4] As a result, one can see how drastically the narrative has flipped from the time when Western nations exterminated native populations to fit their ideas of civilization, to now, when the same nations are now weaponizing queer identity to once again place themselves as superior.

Puar (2017) coins this "sexual exceptionalism" and writes about it specifically in relation to the U.S. (p. 2). That is, she claims that the U.S. positions itself as exceptional in that it pretends to be transcendent of all other "modernization" processes abroad and therefore facilitative of international progress from some "superior" standpoint when it comes to LGBTQ rights (Puar, 2017, p. 8). For Puar, this process is inherently tied to what she calls "homonationalism" – homonormative nationalism (p.2). Homonationalism allows queer people in the U.S. to be assimilated into the nation-state (often via capitalism) in a way that supports normative, "nationalist formations," which then allows the U.S. nation-state to define itself in opposition to – and as better than – other states where queer people are not as visible or

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[3] In 2015 at the UN General Assembly, the President of Zimbabwe stated "We reject attempts to prescribe new rights that are contrary to our values, norms, traditions, and beliefs. We are not gays." (Seckinelgin, 2018, p. 293).

[4] In 2011, a group of queer African people from over 50 civil society groups released a pan-African statement titled "Statement on British 'aid cut' threats to African countries that violate LGBTI rights" – I believe it's worth reading if you wish to understand this point better: https://www.pambazuka.org/activism/statement-british-aid-cut-threats-african-countries-violate-lbgti-rights#:~:text=While%20the%20intention%20may%20well,serious%20backlash%20against%20LGBTI%20people.

integrated into the state (Puar, 2017, pp. 4-10). Puar talks about how queer people outside of U.S. borders are racialized and "un-nationaliz[ed]," because the U.S. is imagined to be the only state where queer people are accepted (Puar, 2017, p. 10). This then brings up the idea that – from a U.S. perspective – "the homosexual other is white, [while] the racial other is straight" (Paur, 2017, p. 32), which all feeds into the narrative that queerness is an inherently white, Western identity. That is, from the view of the U.S. nation-state, queerness is an acceptable identity as long as it fits a respectable white, American model, whereas people of other races from non-Western countries are imagined to be heterosexual. This is the exact phenomenon that Seckinelgin (2018) pointed to in his discussion of UK foreign aid to African countries, and he has shown that this homonationalist rhetoric only serves to silence and erase queer populations that live outside of the Western world (p. 295). Ultimately, this exemplifies that the West cares more about utilizing queerness as a way to position themselves as superior to it does about actually 'saving' queer people.

For both Seckinelgin and Puar, this process is tied to neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is essentially an economic and political theory, it necessitates a rethinking of social organization in which "the individual is central" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 115). To this extent, "identities have been wielded in contemporary discourse to enter systems of power" (Rodriguez, 2019, p. 111). The way that the neoliberal structure in the West has been utilized, individual queer people are homogenized and assimilated in a way that projects that illusion of progress. From this, Western countries can take the most 'respectable' appearing queer people (i.e., white, able-bodied, middle class, etc.) to be the poster child for their projection of acceptance.[5] This makes it so that only certain people are imagined to embody queerness. At the same time, on a global scale, the assimilation of queer individuals allows the West to be viewed as a queer sanctuary, all while propping up the idea that queerness is predominantly found in Western cultures.

The above section has shown how the historical and ideological processes of colonialism and neoliberalism have supported the notion of western queerness. Yet, history alone cannot fully explain this phenomenon on an interpersonal, everyday level. As such, the following section investigates how language and labels around queer identity support the same misguided idea that queerness is Western.

II: (In)Translatability of Queerness

Language norms can often reveal how broader societal phenomena influence individuals' thinking. At the same time, language practices can further bolster the same entrenched ideas and stereotypes – to this extent, queer language in English reproduces the idea of homonationalism (that queer people only belong to certain countries or are most accepted in certain countries). In reading about multilingual queer people's experiences, there are two general trends that emerge: 1) people claim that English labels are most useful for articulating queer identity, and 2) people

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[5] This gives rise to homonormativity, which can be seen in discourse around public figures such as Pete Buttigieg, an American politician, who is often critiqued as not being "gay enough." https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-colum nists/the-queer-opposition-to-pete-buttigieg-explained.

feel that English labels for queer identity are too tied to Western culture. Of course, not every attitude falls neatly into one category or the other, but these are the two overarching themes which I will use to explain the tension around using English for queer identity labels.

A. English Labels as "Most Useful"

The first trend shows that, oftentimes, English queer identity labels can give people a place to discover and define their identity. That is, many people often believe that English gives them the language to describe themselves.

To some degree, this can be explained by the nature of the English language. Floyd's 2020 study examined grammatical gender across a few romance languages (French, Spanish, Portuguese) in comparison to English, concluding that English "affords [the most] flexibility to express gender neutrality" (p. 5). Floyd points to the fact that the use of pronouns in English "is interchangeable because it does not greatly affect adjectives, verbs, and other structures of the sentence" (2020, p. 9). Even though this is likely one factor contributing to the Anglocentrism of queerness, it cannot be the only reason. Many other languages do not have gendered pronouns, such as Chinese, Hindi, Zopau, and Igbo (given, Hindi does have masculine and feminine cases in verbs and adjectives). Furthermore, although English has seemingly more flexibility in expressing nonbinary identities, grammar alone cannot explain why English dominance in queer discourse persists.

Indeed, the idea that English is best-suited to expressing queer identity is not relegated to the realm of gender-neutral expression in grammar. Raza-Sheikh's article includes stories from various multilingual, queer-identifying people, all who express the same overall sentiment: as much as they would like to articulate their identities in their native languages, "'it [is] just more natural in English,'" and "'the terms we can use in English don't really translate into other languages,'" (2020, para. 16, 15). Oftentimes, the labels that people use to describe their sexuality are hyper-specific categorical terms coined in English using Greek, Latin, or other Germanic-Italic prefixes: *demi*sexual, *aego*sexual, *litho*sexual, *pan*sexual, etc. Translating such labels into other languages becomes difficult, positioning English as most useful for expressing queerness. Indeed, in my own experience, I am almost certain that – if I only spoke Bulgarian – I would never have even realized I was queer. That is, English was a medium for discovering my own queerness, without which I likely never would have noticed that I experience attraction differently from the norm. In a slightly different sense, one Catalan-, Spanish-, and English-speaker in Raza-Sheikh's article reported that English was simply the language she discovered her sexuality in, but it was "not [her] real language" (2020, para. 13). Consequently, I do believe that English is incredibly useful for uncovering and defining queerness, but this does not erase the cultural and linguistic queer hegemony that causes people to believe that non-Western and non-English-speaking people are heterosexual by default. In fact, the above point about one's "real" language begins to reveal the sentiment that English is not true to some people's linguo-cultural identities. In the face of this English dominance, some people have begun reclaiming formerly-derogatory terms in their language or creating new terms, which brings up the second trend.

B. English Labels as "Too Tied to Western Culture"

Some queer people feel that using English to label their sexual and/or gender identity ignores some of their other identities – nation, race, culture, etc. That is, they believe that English queer identity labels signify a particular Western, white, middle-class embodiment of queerness that does not apply to them. Manalansan's 2007 article examined the challenges that many Filipino immigrants in the U.S. face when navigating their queer identities. Notably, he writes that, although the Tagalog term "*bakla*" may be considered derogatory, many Filipino men have favored the term over the English term "gay" (p. 24). This reclamation of terms signifies a resistance against stereotyped queerness in one's native culture, while simultaneously rejecting modern, semeingly-Western terms for identity. Indeed, the Filipino queer men felt that "*bakla* symbolized Filipino queerness while *gay* symbolized white queerness" (Manalansan, 2007, p. 24). In this sense, "*gay* is perceived as 'a distinct cultural category'" that is exclusionary of the countless diverse, international forms of queernesses that exist (Manalnsan, 2007, p. 23). As a result, the reclamation of derogatory queer terms in non-English languages is a way to make clear that queerness is not a new, trendy, Western concept, but is rather a ubiquitous identity that is found across cultural lines. It is a way to say "we've always been here, and it's time that you recognized that this identity is not a bad thing."

Yet, recycling pejorative terms can often carry the same hurt and stigma. As such, many queer people have preferred to create new labels for their sexual and gender identities in their native languages. That way, they can reject Anglocentrism while still avoiding derogatory terms. For example, "*transpinoy/transpinay*" was created by transgender individuals in the Filipino diaspora as a play on "filipino/filipina" to describe their identities (Gandhi, 2020, para. 7). Likewise, the terms "*mithliyi/mithliyah*"[6] (meaning "sameness") are used by some to denote gay/lesbian identity in Arabic (Gandhi, 2020, para. 25). This act of language-creation allows queer people to label themselves in a way that they feel is more true to their cultural identities. At the same time, creating these new words gives queer people the agency to move past histories where labels with negative connotations were imposed upon queerness.

These examples have shown how people have been attempting to reject the Western-centric narratives of queerness and carve out their own queer spaces in their own languages. However, is merely translating and creating new queer labels in various languages really the answer to rejecting Western dominance?

III: Questioning the Use of Labels

In many ways, even the act of labeling one's queer identity can be seen as a Western practice. I have many friends who feel that labeling their queer identity in any capacity is more correlated to Western culture, and they do not even feel the need to label themselves at all in their native languages. Following this thread, the following section will show how labels themselves can still uphold Western dominance in queer spaces.

A. Complexity of Labeling

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in this section is that labels have provided a space for people to feel accepted, and when it comes to discussions of abolishing labels, many people are hesitant because they can have a deeply personal connection to their chosen label and the expression[7] and social utility[8] it has given them. Therefore, we must continuously grapple with the fact that abolishing labels may not be for everyone.

Dr. Abigail Oakley illustrates this complexity; she conducted a study in 2016 looking into labeling practices on Tumblr, finding that "Tumblr is a space where [nonbinary genders and sexual orientations] are more widely accepted and even encouraged by the LGBTQIA community that exists there," giving rise to the superfluous labeling discourse that takes place on the platform (p. 8). People on Tumblr have often created microlabels for queer identity, giving people new language to describe highly-specific experiences and feelings that fall under broader, umbrella terms. Oakley acknowledges this as a valuable "form of identity construction" and writes that it is important to the extent that it gives queer individuals a way to describe their "feelings, gender, and desires" and makes their queernesses "recognizable" (2016, p. 9, 11).

At the same time, Oakley writes that labeling queerness is a practice "born of hegemonic, binary discourse" (2016, p. 11). Drawing on Foucault's post-structuralist theory of power, she says that "discourse that attempts to subvert power also reinforces it by first recognizing its power and second by giving it credence through acknowledgment that it needs to be challenged in the first place" (Oakely, 2016, p. 9). In other words, attempts to subvert dominant structures of power can often reinforce that dominance by recognizing that the structure has power to subvert (i.e. the structure would not need to be challenged if it did not have power in the first place). This can be applied to labeling practices: whereas queer people on Tumblr are attempting to subvert dominant narratives of sexuality and gender by creating new, highly-specific terms, this only reinforces the centrality and power that heterosexuality already holds in current society. In this sense, Oakley accepts that "labeling processes through appropriation of hegemonic discourse are not radical enough to elicit true change" (2016, p. 11). Labels are complex, because, as Oakley concludes, they are deeply personal and valuable to individuals at the same time as they uphold oppressive structures of sexuality and gender. So what would it look like to elicit true change?

B. Moving Beyond Labels

Diving further into post-structuralist theory may provide the answer, and will show how labels can be harmful to the extent that they erase certain queer people and reinforce Western-dominance. Namaste (1994) writes that the "articulation of nonheterosexuality bolsters the centrality of heterosexuality itself" (p. 225). What this means is that the creation of new labels for non-heterosexual identities is predicated on the idea that heterosexuality is already the

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[7] Many people I know often feel the need to label because they have struggled coming to terms with their sexuality, and having a concrete label has made them feel more secure and confident. Others prefer to label their identity as an act of resistance against heteronormative beliefs that erase queerness.

[8] Some people (such as myself) like using labels so they have a way to describe their experiences to people, like their partner or their other friends. I also know of one person who uses labels as a defensive tactic in social situations where she doesn't want men to flirt with her.

norm. In order to normalize queer identity, then, one must stop diluting power and reject language that is created with the underlying assumption of a heterosexual frame. For example, existing labels such as "asexual," "omnisexual," etc. are mere "variations of terminology" that already exists to describe identities within a heterosexist structure (Oakley, 2016, p. 9). This reveals how existing labels reinforce heterosexism, and how oftentimes labeling itself is harmful for queerness: if the point of queerness is to reject heterosexism, why does queer terminology rely on heterosexist language? Perhaps the mere act of labeling is the problem. Along these lines, Namaste writes that "the emergence of homosexuality was accompanied by its disappearance" (1994, p. 224). In other words – by openly labeling queer identity – queerness that is not labeled or articulated is erased. In order for some people to be "out" as queer, there have to be queer people who are not "out." This props up the notion that the only "real" queer people are those who are visible and vocal about their identity. But not everyone can be vocal about their identity.

In tying this back to cross-linguistic labeling practices, we can see that, since most queer identity labels are coined in English, it is primarily queer people who speak English who have the ability to articulate who they are. This relegates non-English speakers to the imagined non-queer realm in modern, Western conceptions of thought (i.e. makes non-English-speaking queer people essentially invisible). In this way, applying post-structuralist thought to queer labeling practices shows us how the very act of articulating queerness erases queer people who are not "out," which is further complicated by a multilingual lens that posits that most queer identity labeling occurs in English. As long as the goal is to avoid positioning queerness as Western, labeling practices may always work against transcultural queer populations.

Nevertheless, there are ways to move beyond labels. Kulick (2000) conducts an investigation on gay and lesbian language use, and ultimately concludes that labels are limiting. He writes that deciding what to label non-normative sexual and gender identities is an "ultimately unresolvable problem" in that it does not necessarily provide any useful meaning to identity categories (Kulick, 2000, p. 243). Instead, Kulick asserts that "reformulating questions about gay and lesbian language in terms of 'language and desire'" would allow us to shift the conversation to engage desire and connection rather than superficial identity markers (Kulick, 2000, p. 273). It is still possible for the constructions of sexuality and gender to exist without labels, but it requires shifting the conversation towards expressions of relationality and connection rather than identity categories. What I mean to say is that calling myself asexual gives people very limited information about who I am, my sexuality, how I experience attraction, and what sorts of relationships and connections I want. In fact, it just relegates me to the position of "other" while heterosexuality remains central. Expressing myself as part of an identity category (such as "pansexual") just boxes me into another structure where normative sexual and gender conventions are otherwise assumed. Who we are extends far beyond a single label, and simply finding more and more specific labels is not going to give more meaning to our identities. Furthermore, this paper has shown how these specific labels further entrench Anglocentrism and homonationalism that hurts the vast majority of the queer global population. Admittedly, much will need to change before we can live in a world where labels have no use. Yet, if we can find a

way to speak to one another openly about who we are and what we want, there may come a point when identifying with labels can be seen as repressive. Then, perhaps, we will be able to move beyond hegemonic Western narratives of queerness to talk about how people all over the world love, act, and exist rather than identify.

Conclusion

What all of the above has laid out is how queer identity has come to be perceived as Western. What is now termed 'queerness' was initially sought to be eradicated by Western colonial structures for its inherently nonbinary, ambiguous nature that was a threat to the clearly-demarcated categories of bodies needed for state-building projects. However, with the powerful force of neoliberalism in the 20th century that sought to assimilate as many individuals into the dominant order as possible, queer identity was suddenly co-opted by the Western world to produce the illusion of progress and power.

While this illustrates the larger societal forces at play, language also plays a role in narratives of Western dominance and queerness. The use of the English language to create new terms for sexuality beyond 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' has only propped up the same notion of queerness as emerging and existing in Western contexts only. I have touched on the complex attitudes that many people have towards labeling their queer identities: some have found it comforting to express themselves and find community around a label, while others find labeling unnecessary, and many attitudes show that both things are often true simultaneously.

In the future, I recommend that studies and surveys be conducted that interview queer people and communities from across the world about their attitudes towards labels and labeling practices. In this realm of study going forward, I would hope that people in non-Western countries and cultures would be prioritized as knowledge-creators. Although my paper argues against Western dominance, my analysis inevitably still centers the Western world, and I would be interested to see the kind of knowledge that would emerge when we de-center the West entirely. What might emerge when we look at queer labeling practices at a deeply local, non-Western level? Do the same patterns that I have uncovered in this paper still hold true?

In a world that is systematically violent and/or dismissive towards queer people, discovering language and labels for queerness undoubtedly makes some individuals feel seen. I initially used hyper-specific labels because I *wanted* to emphasize that I – a Bulgarian-American person – wasn't straight. I *wanted* to show that there was something different in how I related to others. I *wanted* to find community and media and language that made me realize it was okay to be who I am; there is power in that, I think. But ultimately it just gives power to the already-existing ways we conceive of sexuality and gender. Given how suffocating dominant narratives of sexuality and gender are, everything I have outlined in this essay points to the fact that the eventual refusal of labels is perhaps the best method to normalize queer and non-queer identity alike.

Indeed, labels themselves ultimately do very little to describe who a person is. Two people who identify themselves with the same label are bound to have vastly different

experiences, beliefs, and desires. Consequently, labels may even be more constricting than liberating. We are not labels; we are people who feel, live, desire, and love.

Activist, writer, and revolutionary James Baldwin – in a 1984 interview conducted by Richard Goldstein – avoided the term "gay," and touched instead on "the question of human affection," how homophobia is weaponized by the state, and the intersections of race and sexuality. When asked about his idea of gay people in his "New Jerusalem," Baldwin replies:

> No one will have to call themselves gay. Maybe that's at the bottom of my impatience with the term. It answers a false argument, a false accusation. [...] Which is that you have no right to be here, that you have to prove your right to be here. I'm saying I have nothing to prove. The world also belongs to me. (Baldwin & Goldstein, 1994, p. 73).

His words are the best way I can think to conclude this essay. He implies that, through labeling, we are trying to prove something, trying to claim some space within the view that heterosexuality is dominant and central. Baldwin encourages us to let it all go, and "go the way your blood beats" (Baldwin & Goldstein, 1994, p. 74). Instead of getting caught up in labels and boxing ourselves into divided categories, we could (and perhaps should) transcend divided categories and talk about desire, affection, and connection. Human relationships are so much more than sex, romance, and gender. Slowly moving away from labels will allow us to find deeper means of interpersonal connection that ultimately will just let queer people exist, and allow queerness to exist across and throughout all nations, races, cultures, and languages.

Having spent my entire life between Bulgarian and American cultures, I have come to despise how certain parts of who I am are assumed to be either Bulgarian or American, but never both. But I *am* both; I am all my identities at once; I am whole. My queerness does not belong to a nationality or a label, it belongs to me.

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