



# Heteroactivism: Beyond Anti-Gay

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## Abstract

This short commentary seeks to begin conceptualisations of heteroactivism, a term used to describe activities that promote heteronormativities as being morally superior to other sexual/gender identities and therefore ‘best for society’. It seeks to show how contemporary oppositions to gender and sexual equalities in places that are seen as ‘liberated’ in terms of sexual and gender rights have moved beyond ‘anti-gay’ discourses and tactics to something else, that has yet to be named or fully comprehended. In this piece, we offer some starting points of the term ‘heteroactivism’, including pointing to its ideological and activist work. We then disentangle heteroactivism, nationalism and white supremacy/fascism, contending that these are distinct phenomena that have different relations depending on the context in which they exist. In the final section, we consider how oppositions to sexual and gendered rights exceed, and at times effectively refute, accusations of ‘homophobia’, ‘biphobia’ and ‘transphobia’, illustrating the inherent geographies of these resistances. The commentary concludes by arguing that contemporary sexual/gendered geopolitical landscapes need an examination of heteroactivism.

## Keywords

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ); homophobia; biphobia; transphobia; sexual rights; gender rights; heteroactivism

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## Introduction

In this short commentary, we outline our attempts to think through how to conceptualise the increasingly strident resistances to sexual and gender equalities in places where such rights are enshrined legislatively and socially in places such as the UK and Canada. Extensive research has explored the limitations of these advances, their potential exclusions and marginalisations within homonormativity (that is the normalisation of certain classed, raced bodies and monogamous married relationship forms, Duggan, 2002), homonationalism and pinkwashing (the use of ‘gay rights’ to create and perpetuate violent nationalist policies and practices, Puar, 2007). We argue, however, that there is a new and burgeoning field/area of activism that is critical for scholars to engage with in comprehending the new and emerging new sexual and gender landscapes marked by state based inclusions of gender and sexual identities. We are calling this form of activism ‘heteroactivism’<sup>1</sup> — a term that describes activism seeking to place heteronormativities (that is the alignment of normative genders and sexualities) as superior to other sexual/gender identities and therefore ‘best for society’ (Nash and Browne, 2015). It builds on scholarship on activism around ‘gender ideologies’, including anti-choice (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017), US based studies of the ‘Christian Right’ (Dowland, 2015; Burack, 2014) and other resistances to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans rights (e.g. Johnson and Vanderbeck, 2014).

In this commentary, we are seeking to start a conversation and to bring together scholars and activists who are aware of emerging forms of heteroactivisms. We use the term ‘resistances’, throughout to recognize that the ‘new normal’ of gender and sexual inclusions is being contested both by homonormativity and heteroactivism. This intervention does not attempt to cover all issues, but instead hopes to spark ideas, debates and, of course, further research and theorisation. We believe that it is important that geographers, and others, work to understand, conceptualise, and critically engage with these emerging, as well as the more long-standing, resistances to sexual and gendered rights within a

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<sup>1</sup> This concept brings heteronormativity together with activism to create the term. These, as this intervention highlights, underpin the contemporary resistances to gender and sexual equalities. In line with discussions of homonationalism and intersectionalities, there is significant work to be done to develop the concept of heteroactivisms to account for multiple social differences and how these operationalise both marginalisation and privilege to fight sexual and gender rights and liberations. Many thanks to Dr. Miriam Smith (York University), for coining the term heteroactivism with us during our discussions about this research.

heteroactivism frame. These are both ideological and action-oriented in that they seek to oppose what is seen as unwanted progress in sexual and gender liberation, and are not necessarily 'anti-gay'. This intervention takes a deliberate Anglo-American focus in seeking to challenge the presumption of unstoppable sexual and gender progress in certain contexts of the Global North. It is here, and particularly contexts such as Canada and the UK, that the world is seen to be 'won', the battle for sexual and gender rights seemingly 'over', with the focus turning to other places or those excluded from these rights. In this way, heteroactivism seeks to name a phenomenon that may or may not be useful in other contexts where sexual and gendered progress has been made through legislation, for example in Brazil. However, in putting this concept into circulation, we hope that it will be reworked, reused and reconceptualised in spatially specific and geographically appropriate ways. This contests the 'god-trick' so often seen in sexuality/queer studies that can fail to acknowledge how theories are produced in and through the places that are studied (Brown, 2012).

Further, heteroactivist campaigns often deploy certain sexual and gendered ideologies in the service of advancing intertwined claims about white supremacy, fascism, nationalism and populism that require further explication. These are not uniform and thus, developing the concept of heteroactivism as an analytic, compels us to examine how heteroactivists often oppose gender and sexual rights within larger political and social agendas that are articulated within specific geographical contexts.

To support our contention that contemporary oppositions to sexual and gender progress that move beyond anti-gay rhetorics, need to be conceptualised and further understood, we begin with a brief overview of our conceptualization of the term 'heteroactivism'. Second, we begin discussions on how the integration of heteroactivism and white supremacy/fascism and nationalism, arguing that these cannot be reduced to each other. We point to how relationships and intersections are manifestly differently in different places. Finally, we consider how heteroactivism effectively deflects accusations of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia by reframing their objections under alternative categories such as parental rights or freedom of speech.

### **Conceptualizing Heteroactivism**

Heteroactivism describes both an ideology and a movement displaying distinctive formulations across myriad geographies. It conceptualises the ideological arguments and resulting activisms of a broad range of groups currently on the rise within contemporary global, national, urban/rural contexts. It refers to the co-ordinated ideological response to sexual and gendered equalities rooted in an unwavering belief in the centrality of heteronormativity (the confluence of gendered, classed, and racialized norms within man/woman divides that come together in normative heterosexual relationships) as foundational to a healthy and sustainable society. Heteronormative relationships, experienced within civil or

religious marriages, are seen as the best (and ideally the only) location for the birth and raising of children and as the building blocks of a stable society (Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash and Browne, 2015).

Developing the term 'heteroactivism' provides scholars and activists with a lens through which to engage with the current strategies being deployed in resistance to sexual and gender rights. Naming these contemporary oppositions is designed to give scholars and activists a term to discuss and conceptualise coherent understandings of, and counter arguments to, the key heteroactivist conceptualisations, ideologies, and practices. It has political merit in its ability to name (and define) a movement that falls outside common parlance and moves away from terms that are currently in use. Whilst there can be little doubt that there is an urgent and pressing need to understand how heteroactivism and other forms of oppression (such as racism) are felt, it is also crucial to also understand how heteroactivist arguments seek to reinstate or perpetuate sexual and gendered inequalities in less obvious but increasingly effective ways.

Current research on various anti-gender and sexual equalities groups include but are not limited to, scholarship on religious resistances including from Catholic and Anglican churches (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017, Johnson and Vanderbeck, 2014) as well as various conservative and 'traditionalist' organisations (Browne and Nash 2014; Nash and Browne 2015). While this research highlights more traditional forms of opposition to sexual and gender equalities, using a heteroactivist lens teases out underlying gender and sexual claims embedded in various organising around parental rights, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, as well as those seeking to impose limits on reproductive rights including abortion and fertility treatments. Heteroactivism, as a concept, enables us to capture and develop our understandings of a broad array of oppositions and resistances including oppositions to 'gender ideologies', trans, abortion and reproductive rights, building on scholarship in these areas.

Heteroactivism is inherently geographical. Whilst various forms of heteroactivism are often presumed to be undertaken by the 'Christian Right' and/or conservative groups operating in and through the context of the USA, placing heteroactivism solely within either Christianity or in the right-wing element of the political spectrum is problematic. Locating these activisms as emanating solely from the US is also problematic given it overlooks the specificities of place in the formulation of resistances (Nash and Browne, 2015; Browne and Nash, 2014). These specificities need further attention, including in addressing urban/rural divides and imaginings. Fetner (2008) shows the rural USA can often be perceived as central to oppositions to gender and sexual equalities, and hostile to LGBT lives, and often anti-gay. However, geographies of sexualities has complicated these readings of urban/rural tolerance/intolerance in ways that need further development through discussions of heteroactivism beyond the USA religious right.

Resistances to sexual and gender equalities also arise at the local or grassroots level, focused on the more intimate spaces of home and school but are often embedded in national and indeed transnational discourses that are reshaped and adapted as they travel (Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash and Browne, 2015). In Canada and the UK for example, schools are increasingly the site of contestations over curricula that references LGBT families or of objections over the presence of trans children. These resistances deflect accusations of homophobia or transphobia, by focusing on children who need ‘protection’, and parents who have the primary right to make decisions about what their children are taught, rather on than ‘deviant homosexuals’.

Specific resistances can take on regional, national and international importance through court cases, high profile media coverage and transnational ‘warnings’ regarding the ‘unintended consequences’ of sexual and gender advances, such as same-sex marriage. This can be seen when local and often small service providers refuse the provision of services on the basis of sexuality or gender identity. The rhetoric is often similar across national boundaries, where they state that their refusal of LGBT people specifically is *not* based not on their views of homosexuality, and is instead their right to religious freedom. This placing of religious freedom in competition with sexual and gender rights has been a fruitful battleground for heteroactivisms making local and specific actions work as national and international cases for resisting the ‘slippery slope’ of gender and sexual liberation.

## **HeteroACTIVISM**

The term heteroactivism not only speaks to an ideological stance about the centrality of heteronormativity (normatively gendered, raced and classed), but signals the public and strident activist interventions that are gaining more traction in the public sphere. These activisms have largely been associated with LGBT activisms<sup>2</sup>. Heteroactivisms are political and social, seeking to influence change through governments and media and are often supported by conferences, online publications, workshops, websites and scholarly journals as well as undertaking original research, which can be peer reviewed (e.g. Mark Regenerus).

A classic tactic of protests, including silent vigils, lobbying, court cases and large-scale protests, has been successfully utilised by heteroactivists. Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) illustrate how these protests, constituting transnational anti-gender campaigns, learn from each other and develop effective interventions. In a digital age, the multiscalar operationalisation of heteroactivisms in digitally

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<sup>2</sup> LGBT activisms have been shown by social movement scholars, particularly in the USA context, to have been formed in a symbiotic relationship with those they oppose, most often the religious Right (Fetner, 2008). These social movement analyses and the formulations of resistances to heteroactivisms through their mutual constitution with heteroactivisms is undoubtedly an important area of study.

connected contexts creates how heteroactivism is contemporaneously manifest. Online campaigns, regular newsletters and cross-national communication form and create local, regional and national resistant tactics through discussions, resource sharing and offering support and encouragement (Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash *et al.*, 2017). However, more work is needed to understand the manifestations and operationalisations of heteroactivism in ways that understand its move beyond anti-gay rhetoric, in order to identify new forms of opposition and resistance.

### *Heteroactivism, race and class*

Examining heteroactivist ideologies and practices enhances the necessarily complex and nuanced analyses of many contemporary issues that are focused on the increasing visibility of white supremacy, and the rise of nationalism and populism, evidenced in the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. Heteroactivist concerns, albeit often reformulated and sometimes incoherent, can find a home within white supremacy and fascism, anti-immigration, and other forms of oppressive race and class politics. Conversely, in Canada new immigrants can be used by heteroactivists to promote ‘Canadian’ values by arguing for the conservative ‘nature’ of these new ‘others’ who need their ‘traditional values’ respected. However, the conflation of heteroactivism and far right populist nationalism is easily critiqued and thus care must be taken to understand the overlaps, as well as the divergences.

There are significant disparities in the populist right, over sexual and gender equalities (and they are by no means uniform in their approach) (Siegel, 2017). Across Europe in some cases nationalist parties, and those seeking to ‘protect’ (white) Christianity, are also championing reversing sexual and gendered rights, and in Australia, the Q Society are anti-LGBT rights and anti-Islam, as are Christian Concern in the UK. In other cases, those on the far right can appeal to various forms of homonationalism, as evidenced in the recent German elections with the right-wing Alternative for Germany (AFD) headed by a lesbian, Alice Weidel. In drawing on fears of ‘Muslim’ others, nationalist and fascist parties can seek to gain lesbian and gay support by arguing that ‘they kill gay people’. Co-opting gay rights, as ‘our values’, these groups then use classic homonationalist discourses to create a white, national ‘us’, versus a brown, dangerous ‘them’ (Puar, 2007). On the other hand, AFD does not support gay marriage, but does support civil unions, this is not unusual. In the UK, some heteroactivists including UKIP (a right-wing nationalist party), opposed same-sex marriage declaring that they had ‘always’ supported civil partnerships, because they did not oppose them (Browne and Nash, 2015). This dual position of both homonationalist support of gay people against ‘Muslim others’, and heteroactivist opposition to gender and sexual rights, plays out in unusual ways. For example, UKIP has a faction that supports LGBT party members and in September 2017 a far right anti-Muslim lesbian, Anne Marie Waters, came second in the leadership election. It was also a heteroactivist group called ‘Support the Family’, who at the same party conference released a leaflet

that equated homosexuality with Hitler and the Yorkshire ripper (<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/leaflet-ukip-conference-compares-gay-11257866>), and the new party leader, Harry Bolton, shortly after winning the leadership declared that LGBT rights had ‘gone too far’. In the recent Irish referendum on same-sex marriage, nationalist discourses were at the fore but without the links (as of yet) to fascist or white supremacist discourses and yet relied on an understanding of ‘Irishness’ grounded in heteroactivist claims (Browne, Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2017). Conversely, heteroactivisms are not solely the preserve of the right-wing. Those on the left can also seek to reaffirm ‘traditional marriage’ as Green Party councillors in the UK have done.

These examples illustrate the importance of geographers engaging with heteroactivisms (and discussions of white supremacy/fascism). Nationalism, populism and fascism need to be explored in relation to their sexual and gendered ideologies and practices that are often oppressive, but not necessarily of homonormative gay people. Developing the term heteroactivism allows us also to examine how heteroactivists oppose gender and sexual rights in ways that allow them to refute homophobia while using claims about freedom of speech and religion as a shield to accusations of ‘hate.’ Thus, these labels are easily refuted, through creating new rhetorics, particularly those that move beyond ‘anti-gay’.

### **Heteroactivism: Isn’t this just homophobia/gender ideology?**

To date, resistances to LGBT equalities are often understood as reflecting homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic responses to the visibility of LGBT people. More recent activism is framed as opposition to a deviant ‘gender ideology’ (a term that heteroactivists use) (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). While homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia, understood as ‘irrational fears’ or ‘phobias’ of LGBT people, do motivate some resistances, we would argue that this is too narrow a term to capture the larger ideologies and co-ordinated resistances underpinning oppositional activism. In the past couple of years, claims to freedom of speech and the existence of an ‘intolerant left’ have effectively countered accusations of homophobia/biphobia/transphobia which no longer adequately describe oppositional motivations (although we would argue that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia linger on).

Similarly, with respect to resistances to ‘gender ideologies’, these are seen as a ‘threat’ to children, an attack on ‘the family’ or as an attack on a child’s ‘biological confidence’, because they undermine heteronormative relationships. It is not just about creating men/women, it is about creating the ‘right kind’ of men/women who form monogamous and normative relationships with each other (Nash et al., 2017).

Questions about sexual rights have in recent times been predominantly linked to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and other perceived deviations from heteronormative expectations. However, battles over sexual rights also encompass

reproductive rights, including abortion, fertility treatments and contraception, as well as alternative social arrangements including single mothers, childless heterosexual couples, polygamous or open relationships and sex education. In all these circumstances, those opposed to these rights take some form of what we would argue is a heteroactivist position, in seeking to shore up the normative male-female family unit against the assaults posed by any of these situations. Abortion and other reproductive rights are read by heteroactivists as questioning heteronormative orders that see women's bodies and lives as created for the purposes of heterosexual reproduction. Thus, whilst scholars and activists may not see the links between anti-choice activism and anti-LGBT activism, these groups understand these as within the same push to liberalise genders and sexualities to the detriment of society.

## Conclusion

Heteroactivisms are an emerging form of opposition to gender and sexual rights, that as an analytic helps us to conceptualise an element in the contemporary complex geopolitical landscape. Heteroactivist groups can be conflicting, incommensurate and fragmented with related ideas that seek to oppose gender and sexual rights in ways that have evolved with the legislative and cultural changes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that move beyond oppositions based on the immorality of certain gendered and sexual practices, identities and lives. These are produced through multi-scalar engagements and, because they move beyond vilification, they cannot be contained within terms such as homophobia, biphobia, transphobia. Underpinned by heteronormativities, they travel transnationally, touch down differently in different places thereby constituting distinctive heteroactivist ideologies and activities that cannot be universalised, and need to be explored both in context and in relation to their transnational networks and interlinkages (Browne and Nash, 2014; Nash and Browne, 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017).

Whilst they can overlap with, and can be mutually formed through, fascism, populism and white supremacy, they cannot be conflated with these. The sexual and gender politics of these groups and organisations are multifarious. These organisations may well be homonationalist in their support of 'gay rights', which is mobilized against 'Muslim others'. Nonetheless, where they do oppose sexual and gender rights, their arguments, frames of reference and ideologies are different to the arguments that predominated at the end of the last century. Namely heteroactivists do not focus on the dangerous, sinful and perverse homosexual (although some still do), but instead emphasise the place of the heterosexual nuclear family in created functioning societies and as the best place to raise children (Nash and Browne, 2015).

As heteroactivist organisations actively and effectively challenge and distance themselves from accusations of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, arguably their position that they are not irrational or 'phobic' is somewhat accurate. Heteroactivist resistances are not irrational; they are carefully considered,

theorised, debated and indeed researched. As heteroactivists reframe issues such that it is not about dislike or prejudice, but instead about protection, care, and seeking the 'best for society', accusations of 'hate' can ring hollow. There is a need for new counter-arguments that understand the field and these new discourses. Naming and understanding these oppositions in complex ways will enable more effective critique and opposition, alongside the key agenda of examining the effects and implications of their ideologies and actions. We hope this piece begins, and extends, fruitful engagements in both academic and activist contexts.

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