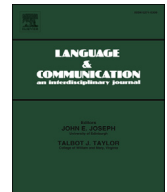


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Sexing diversity: Linguistic landscapes of homonationalism

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Our goal in this article is to illustrate some of the semiotic complexity of pinkwashing and homonationalism in the Israeli context, a complexity that we argue is inadequately modelled by a perspective that focuses solely on the “agentive” or “intentional” actions of the state. Instead, we draw on a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches to demonstrate how a series of seemingly mundane practices involving an intricate web of state, para-state and non-state actors contribute to pinkwashing, and hence to the reproduction of Israeli homonationalism.

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1. Introduction

The notion of “diversity” has recently received renewed attention partly as a result of an increased interest on the part of some sociologists in understanding and theorising what are perceived as ‘new’ forms of sociological complexity. In particular, Vertovec’s (2007) concept of “superdiversity” has been influential in opening up research agendas, networks and discussions among scholars interested in the relationship between language and society (see in particular Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Androutsopoulos and Juffermans, 2014; Deumert, 2014 for a poignant critique). Arguably, however, diversity – whether or not augmented by a superlative prefix – has to a certain extent always been at the centre of two different but interrelated spheres of language and communication, namely multilingualism research and language policy practices. While scholarship on multilingualism is generally underpinned by a belief that linguistic diversity is an asset to be celebrated or a condition to strive for (see in particular Baker, 2011), nation-state apparatuses have historically thought otherwise. As Blommaert (2015: 82) cogently puts it,

Languages were distributed within and separated by national boundaries, and the national boundaries, in turn, also defined the criteria of belonging and membership of the national community, creating ‘migration’ and, later, ‘transnational’, and ‘global’ flows as deviant patterns hard to fit within the monocentric nation-state imagination. ‘Diversity’ stood, and stands, for that which violates the rules of a spatially imagined political, historical, social, cultural and linguistic monocentricity.

This has been and is still true of several forms of ethnolinguistic nationalism, stemming from nineteenth century, Western, romantic ideas about one language, one people, one country. However, as Heller and Duchêne (2007) have noted, changing

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patterns in global connectivities have had diverse effects on the ways in which nationalism transforms itself in order to retain its hegemonic status as the unquestionable ideology of (late-) modern political organisation. Indeed some socio-political entities, like Belgium or the UK, amongst others, are tightening the monocentric noose of the national language/culture link (see [Pulinx and van Avermaet, 2015](#); [Blackledge, 2005](#)). In contrast, others appear to be “embracing diversity for the sake of unity” ([del Valle, 2007](#): 242). Switzerland, for example, is capitalising – quite literally – on linguistic diversity as the distinguishing trademark of its national identity (see [Del Percio, 2013](#); [Duchêne and Del Percio, 2013](#)).

How diversity can be incorporated into nationalist discourse for a nation-state’s economic gain is also in the focus of this article. While existing sociolinguistic and discourse analytical research tends to foreground the commodification of language and ethnicity (see in particular [Heller, 2003](#) and the contributions to [Duchêne and Heller, 2012](#)), our focus here is on sexual and gender diversity in relation to the processes of marketing Israel as a progressive nation-state. Commonly known as *pinkwashing*, this sort of nation-branding strategy is a manifestation of *homonationalism*, ‘a historical convergence of state practices, transnational circuits of queer commodity culture and human rights paradigms, and broader global phenomena such as the increasing entrenchment of Islamophobia’ ([Puar, 2013](#): 337) that serves to position the equitable treatment of lesbians and gays as the icon of “civilisation” and “progress” and to portray societies that do not meet this standard as “barbaric”, “uncivilised” and “unworthy” (see also [Puar, 2011](#)). In other words, homonationalism is the discursive process through which both state and non-state actors bring sexual diversity into the very definition of the nation-state so as to legitimise the exclusion and/or repression of others who are portrayed as lacking in this crucial criterion of “tolerance of sexual diversity”. Pinkwashing¹ is the public face of this homonationalist discourse, the way through which Israel can present itself to the rest of the world as a beacon of sexual liberalism in the Middle East, and concomitantly “wash away” neo-colonial policies toward Palestinians (see in particular [Puar, 2007, 2013](#); [Schulman, 2012](#)). But pinkwashing is not simply a form of “soft power” through which Israel highlights itself as democratic for the international diplomatic community. Pinkwashing is also underpinned by a strong capitalist imperative, in that the marketing of a sexually and gender progressive Israel also aims to attract a large number of “pink” consumers from around the world. The most successful manifestation of this twofold nationalist/consumerist enterprise is Tel Aviv Pride, which, according to the Israeli media, attracted over 20,000 foreign tourists for its twentieth anniversary in 2013. Obviously, the main audience of pinkwashing is the international community of gay and lesbian tourists, who are to be convinced to visit Israel not only for its beaches, sun, and attractive citizens but also for its track record in support of gay and lesbian rights. Pinkwashing, and the state support of gay and lesbian rights more broadly, has been received with mixed feelings within Israel, with conservative religious groups overtly opposing gay and lesbian enfranchisement, and radical queer and trans collectives questioning some of the agenda underpinning pinkwashing (see also [Milani, in press](#)).

In this article, we not only bring into the analytical spotlight initiatives driven by the Israeli state and its official tourism apparatus, but we also cast a critical eye on the circuit of discourses that make up Israeli homonationalism more broadly, paying attention to some of the more mundane (micro) queer complicities (see also [Oswin, 2004](#)) that legitimate (macro) state-driven practices. For this purpose, we investigate a sample of textual formations that are part of a larger corpus of data consisting of newspaper articles, photos, webpages, interviews and material artefacts related to the so-called ‘Brand Israel Campaign’ and to Tel Aviv Pride. We do so through a linguistic landscape approach that is informed by (1) [Deleuze and Guattari’s \(2004\)](#) ideas about the rhizome, (de)territorialisation, and reterritorialisation; (2) [Billig’s \(1995\)](#) discourse analytical insights into banal nationalism; and (3) [Said’s \(1994 \[1978\]\)](#) theorising of orientalism. On one hand, through discourse analysis, we seek to offer a detailed account of the *discursive tactics* through which homonationalism operates and is legitimated via a variety of apparently banal discursive practices. Thus, we seek to add linguistic precision and empirical substance to an existing body of scholarship that is largely theoretical in nature and has therefore failed to give a detailed description of how homonationalism actually works through discourse (see however [Levon and Mendes, 2015](#); [Ritchie, 2015](#) for notable exceptions). On the other hand, through the lens of a linguistic landscape approach, we seek to bring fresh insights into the ways in which banal homonationalism operates *spatially* in discursive, bodily, and affective practices. In this way, we want to highlight the theoretical relevance of [Deleuze and Guattari’s \(2004\)](#) ideas, an important but we believe somewhat neglected framework within sociolinguistics and language and communication more broadly (see however [Pietikäinen, 2015](#) for a notable exception that also spells out the potential limitations of a rhizomatic approach). Before delving into detailed analysis of relevant texts, we begin with some general background on the politics of sexuality in Israel and, in particular, the Brand Israel Campaign, followed by a brief overview of the theoretical apparatus that informs the analysis.

2. Sexuality in Israel: from Zionism to the brand Israel campaign

In the 2009 EastWest Global Nation Brand Perception Index, Israel ranked 192 out of 200 countries surveyed, ‘behind North Korea, Cuba and Yemen and just before Sudan’ ([Schulman, 2011](#)). This, despite the official launch in 2007 of the Brand

¹ The term pinkwashing was originally coined by Breast Cancer Action to capture the activities of “a company or organisation that claims to care about breast cancer by promoting a pink ribbon product, but at the same time produces, manufactures and/or sells products that are linked to the disease.” ([thinkbeforeyoupink.org](#)). Based on the association between the colour pink and non-normative sexualities, the terms was later re-signified by queer activists and academic with a view to capturing the practices through which states present themselves as gay and lesbian friendly in order to legitimise other discriminatory practices such as legislation that curtails the rights of indigenous, immigrant and religious groups (see e.g. [Dreher’s \(2016\)](#) work on Australia).

Israel Campaign, a coordinated programme funded by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, the Israeli Prime Minister's Office and the Israeli Finance Ministry intended to improve the image of Israel abroad (Popper, 2005). The idea for the campaign originated in 2002 with an American marketing conglomerate that took it upon itself to conduct perception research on Israel (at no charge), and presented its findings to the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 2005 (Elia, 2012). Principal among these results was a need to promote Israel as a vibrant and modern society, and to downplay its militaristic and religious facets.

Initial efforts associated with the Brand Israel Campaign included promotional junkets for architecture and food writers and marketing campaigns designed to attract young, heterosexual male tourists (such as a photospread in *Maxim* magazine entitled "Women of the Israeli Defence Forces" featuring young Israeli women in bikinis) (Schulman, 2011). Alongside a focus on heterosexual constituencies, the Brand Israel Campaign also sought from the outset to tap into the lesbian and gay market (see also Extract 1 below), although a variety of social actors have questioned the truth of this aspect of the branding project (see also Levon, 2010). Either way, the endorsement of "pink tourism" reached its most visible peak in 2009 when the Israeli Association for Lesbians and Gays (the *Agudah*) and the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association co-hosted a conference in Tel Aviv with the goal of promoting Israel as a gay and lesbian tourist destination. A year later, the promotion of gay and lesbian tourism became a formal policy of the Israeli government with the launching of the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe website (see below), an online tourist campaign funded by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, the Tel Aviv Tourism Board and the *Agudah* (Sadeh, 2010). Shortly thereafter, the online campaign was followed by the organisation of an "Israeli Pride Month" in San Francisco in 2010, and the hosting, from 2011, of stands promoting "gay Tel Aviv" at Pride festivals around the world (including Toronto, Berlin and Stockholm; see below).

The use of the term *pinkwashing* to describe activities like those of the Brand Israel Campaign is normally credited to Ali Abunimah, editor of *Electronic Intifada*, and to the San Francisco Bay Area activist group QUIT (Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism) in 2010. Yet, while the term pinkwashing is thus relatively new, scholars have for some time discussed the ways in which progressive policies toward lesbians and gays are used by the Israeli government to promote itself as a liberal and democratic society, and, in so doing, to obscure grave human rights violations in other areas. Solomon (2004: 636), for example, describes how "queerness – or at least the tolerance of queerness – has come to stand for democratic liberalism [in Israel]". Similarly, Amireh (2010: 637) notes that "the positive rhetorical function of queerness ... [feeds] into the wider culture war between Israelis and Palestinians, where it functions to consolidate a fractured Zionist consensus" (see also Puar, 2011). Understanding how queerness functions in this way in the Israeli context requires situating both the Brand Israel Campaign and the Israeli state's treatment of its lesbian and gay citizens in relation to the ideological system that underpins contemporary Israeli society and to the historical development of the Zionist national project from which this system is derived.

From its inception, the State of Israel has been characterised by three simultaneous, if conflicting, *discourses of citizenship*, or ideological frames for understanding the relationship between the citizen and the state: a liberal discourse, a republican discourse, and an ethno-national discourse (Shafir and Peled, 2002). In a liberal conception of citizenship, the individual citizen is seen as the locus of power and agency, and the role of the state is limited to protecting the freedoms that naturally inhere in all individuals. Liberalism is thus a universalist philosophy, where individuals – by virtue of being citizens – possess certain "inalienable" rights (e.g., Sandel, 1998). The republican view, in contrast, locates power and the allocation of privileges in relation to a communally defined moral "common good" (e.g., Taylor, 1989), and individual citizens are granted rights and privileges by the state in direct proportion to their contribution to this "common good". Republicanism is thus, by definition, not a universalist doctrine, but instead establishes certain civic obligations as criteria for belonging. Finally, ethno-nationalism, like republicanism, is also a non-universalist formulation, yet one in which civic belonging is defined in naturalised and immutable terms (Greenfeld, 1992). In an ethno-national state, individuals are empowered only to the extent that they can claim membership in a homogenous descent group, and the state is viewed as embodying the ethnic-cum-national community. Mindful of the potentially problematic nature of taxonomies, it is important to note that we do not distinguish between liberalism, republicanism and ethno-nationalism in order to make a teleological argument or to compare the relative virtue of one discourse of citizenship to another. Rather, we use the taxonomy as a useful analytical tool for describing the different ideologies of belonging and nationalism that have historically animated Zionist politics and that, we argue, underpin pinkwashing activities in Israel today.

From the beginning of Jewish settlement in Palestine and throughout the pre-state period, the Zionist national project was defined primarily in republican terms (Shafir and Peled, 2002).² For Zionist settlers, the establishment of a Jewish national homeland in Palestine and the invention of the new, empowered "Israeli Jew" were the twin pillars of the "common good" that defined the pre-State society, and individuals were thus judged by their perceived contributions to achieving these goals (Almog, 2000; Kimmerling, 2001; Shafir and Peled, 2002). With the creation of the state in 1948, this understanding of civic virtue was institutionalised and codified, and became the organising principle of Israeli republicanism. At the same time, the establishment of the state – and the mass immigration of Jews and displacement of Palestinians that accompanied it –

² We use the term Zionism to cover a range of political movements in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that shared the common goal of establishing a Jewish nation-state in Palestine. Despite the common ultimate aim, different Zionist groups had widely diverging outlooks and approaches, ranging from more Marxist-infused socialist versions of Zionism to those more firmly grounded in nineteenth century European ethno-nationalism (though all Zionist movements obviously shared a belief in the existence of a distinct Jewish "people" who a right to a national homeland). From the outset, Zionism was thus not a unified political movement, and has always involved negotiating between the different types of political imperatives described here.

brought with it the need to legitimate the new nation in the eyes of the world and to enfranchise a diverse body of new citizens and residents. [Shafir and Peled \(2002\)](#) describe how this was accomplished by the selective incorporation of elements from both liberal and ethno-national citizenship discourses. From liberalism came the notion of the uniform rule of law, the establishment of institutions like the Israeli Supreme Court, and the claim to non-discrimination on the basis of race, religion or sex in the Israeli Declaration of the Establishment of the State. Ethno-nationalism, in turn, brought with it the Law of Return, by which all Jews in the world can automatically become citizens of Israel, and the so-called *status quo* agreement, which, among other things ceded control of family law (including marriage and divorce) to established religious authorities. Yet despite the inclusion of these liberal and ethno-national components, [Shafir and Peled \(2002\)](#) document how republicanism continued to predominate in the newly established state, such that the Israeli incorporation regime ([Soysal, 1994](#)) was a hierarchically-ordered system, with liberalism and ethno-nationalism arranged around a central hub of hegemonic republican (i.e., Zionist) discourse.

The republican dominated system remained in place for about forty years, from 1948 to the mid-1980s, when a series of simultaneous events ‘punctured’ ([Shafir and Peled, 2002](#)) the social equilibrium. These included the implementation of the Emergency Economic Stabilisation Plan of 1985, designed to combat runaway inflation; the beginning of the first Palestinian intifada in 1987; and the mass immigration to Israel of former citizens of the USSR in 1990–91. In different ways, these events all led to an apparent demise of the republican model and a concomitant rise of both liberalism and ethno-nationalism in the Israeli public sphere. It is this purported decline of republicanism and the resulting parallel growth of individual/liberal and communal/ethno-national claims that scholars refer to when they speak of the “fracturing” of the Zionist consensus. It is, however, a mistake to dismiss republicanism entirely and to interpret contemporary Israeli society solely as a battle between liberal and ethno-national values. While it is perhaps less explicit than it was before, republicanism is still alive and kicking in Israel and undergirds much of contemporary social and political practice.

The history of lesbian and gay rights in Israel is a good illustration of this point. Despite some early advances, such as the *de facto* decriminalisation of sodomy in 1963, the enfranchisement of Israel’s lesbian and gay citizens really began to take hold in the 1990s ([Walzer, 2000](#)), with a series of legislative changes and judicial decisions awarding lesbians and gays the right (and, in fact, the obligation) to serve in the military (1993), equality of benefits in the public and private sectors (1996 and 1994, respectively), the ability to engage in second-parent adoption (1999), and the ability to have same-sex marriages legally performed abroad recognised in Israel (2006). Popular discourse, as well as Israeli international marketing activities, portrays these gains as triumphs of liberalism, i.e., the extension of rights to all citizens regardless of sexuality. Yet at a more fundamental level, changes in the treatment of lesbians and gays in Israel have been firmly grounded in a republican conception of the state. Lesbians and gays are enfranchised to the extent that they comply with the dominant trope of Zionist civic virtue, what one of us has described as the “men as soldiers, women as mothers” model ([Levon, 2010, 2015](#)). The affordance of new rights to Israeli lesbians and gay is thus less an issue of a universalist, liberal imperative for equality as it is an extension of the republican franchise to include (certain) lesbians and gays.³ This extension does nothing, however, to diminish the importance of Israeli republicanism’s core principle – that rights and privileges are accorded in proportion to one’s contribution to the Zionist national project. And this, ultimately, is why the benefits of the judicial and legislative achievements over the past twenty years are distributed so unevenly among lesbians and gays in Israel/Palestine, excluding those who are not seen as contributing to the Israeli “common good” (most notably Palestinians, but also genderqueers, pacifists, and many others; [Kuntsman, 2009](#); [Gross, 2010](#); [Hochberg, 2010](#); [Levon, 2010](#)).

To cast things into the theoretical terms of this article, the republican incorporation of (certain articulations of) homosexuality into the Zionist framework is how homonationalism is manifested in the Israeli context. In other words, a ‘tolerance of queerness’ ([Solomon, 2004](#)) has become one of the principal ways in which contemporary Israeli republicanism mediates between the total inclusivity of liberalism and the stark exclusivity of ethno-nationalism, rendering such tolerance a hallmark of what it means to be a “good Israeli” today. Pinkwashing activities like those of the Brand Israel campaign obscure this complexity, and present Israel instead as a champion of liberal ideals. As analysts, it is crucial for us to realise that lesbian and gay rights in Israel do not, however, emerge from a deep commitment to democratic liberalism, but rather from an adaptation of the hegemonic republican system – the same system that motivates and legitimises Israel’s ongoing racist and colonialist practices in other arenas ([Stein, 2010](#); [Puar, 2011](#)). Examining the inner working of pink-washing in Israel is thus about more than simply uncovering a misrepresentation of reality (though it is that as well). It is also about revealing how dominant systems of exclusion and oppression continue to animate mainstream Israeli society.

3. Homonationalism: a rhizomatic linguistic landscape

Over the last decade or so, Linguistic Landscape (LL) has established itself as a field in its own right within the broader study of the role played by language in relation to social processes. The aim of LL research is to “describe and identify systematic patterns of the presence and absence of languages in public spaces and to understand the motives, pressures,

³ We do not mean to imply that liberalism in practice leads to total inclusive equality. Because of its sole focus on the individual and its unwillingness to consider group-based claims, liberalism cannot address patterns of structural inequality and tends instead to reinforce already existing patterns of exclusion and domination. What we refer to here, however, is liberalism’s theoretical position in support of total enfranchisement and equality, as opposed to republicanism’s and ethno-nationalism’s more contingent views.

ideologies, reactions and decision-making of people regarding the creation of LL in its varied forms” (Shohamy and Ben-Rafael, 2015: 1). Notably, what falls within the notion of language is itself a heated topic of discussion in LL scholarship. While early contributions seem to have taken a strictly logocentric approach that is underpinned by a rather narrow understanding of language as written code, more recent interventions have broadened the boundaries of the linguistic so as to encompass visual images, smells and tastes, materiality, corporeality and the broader realm of *emotion* and *affect* (see in particular Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010; Milani, 2015; Peck and Stroud, 2015; Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015). Such an expansion has had interesting ramifications as to what counts as *legitimate data* not simply for LL research, but for the study of language and communication more generally. While road signs, street and place names, shop signs and billboards have been, and, to a certain extent, still are the main objects of LL investigation, the materials of the built environment, food, tattoos, bodies and T-shirts have recently been included into the inventory of empirical sources to be analysed.

Addressing the spaces rather than the objects of LL investigation, researchers on online environments have argued for the inclusion of variety of ‘netscapes’ into the analytical foci of LL scholarship (see e.g. Jones, 2010). Warning against keeping too neat a separation between the material/real, on the one hand, and the virtual, on the other, King (2012: 108–9) makes the compelling argument that “cyberspace becomes eminently real when one considers that property can be owned there, identities cultivated, crimes committed, and purchases made. The material and the virtual fail to fit easily into a model that positions them as exclusive polar opposites”. Reasoning along similar lines in a discussion of the relationships between netscapes and more traditional spaces of the built environment, Blommaert (2016: 8) advocates that “[i]t is the way in which the new modes of communication merge and interact with old ones, and so reshape existing communicative economies at all levels of social life and from metropolises to margins in the world, that should concern us”. Because the Internet “reshuffles the empirical character of what is *public* and what is *space* [...] [it] not just invite[s] but demand[s] profound theoretical re-imaginings” (Blommaert, 2016: 7).

We believe that some of Deleuze and Guattari’s (2004) conceptual tools may be useful starting points for beginning some of the theoretical re-imaginings advocated by Blommaert and others in LL research. This is because their theoretical apparatus not only captures the interconnectedness between different spaces but also takes into account the relationship between discourses, bodies and the working of affect within and through such spaces (see also Cameron and Kulick, 2003).

3.1. Homonationalism as a rhizome

The details of Deleuze and Guattari’s joint *oeuvre* cannot be given adequate consideration within the constraints of a journal article. Suffice it to say that one of their main contributions lies in a critique of any form of binary thinking, which they argue underpins a variety of disciplines, including linguistics. Using metaphors borrowed from botany, Deleuze and Guattari propose as an alternative the notion of the *rhizome*, a “subterranean stem [...] [that] assumes very diverse forms, from ramified surface extension in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (2004: 7). The main characteristics of a rhizome are as follows:

- (1) the infinite possibility of *connectivity* between any point of a rhizome, leading to heterogeneous “connections between semiotic chains, [...] [which] are not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural, and cognitive” (2004: 8);
- (2) *multiplicity*, understood as an increase or decrease of density and intensity (e.g. a thinner ramification vis-à-vis a thicker tuber);
- (3) the possibility of *rupture*, following which “a rhizome may be broken, shatter at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (2004: 10); and
- (4) its representability as a *map*.

We believe that this theorising of the rhizome is helpful in capturing the *capillarity* of Israeli homonationalism as well as its *semiotic complexity* as a discursive, bodily/material and affective phenomenon (see also Puar, 2007 for a similar approach to US homonationalism). As we illustrate in the analytical sections below, homonationalism is not only the product of discursive practices (e.g. official tourism websites talking *about* the spaces of Tel Aviv and Israel) and bodily/material spatial tactics in specific spaces (e.g. a human-sized costume representing Tel Aviv at the Stockholm Pride parade). Homonationalism also generates, and gains legitimacy from, more subtle forms of global emotional attachment, with gay men from all over the world declaring their attraction for Israeli men, and by proxy, their love for Tel Aviv and Israel. Such connections vary in density and intensity (e.g. from rather sparse news reporting in Western mainstream media to dense bodily assemblages at, say, Tel Aviv Pride). And while critiques of homonationalism happen all the time both through online and street activism, homonationalism starts up again in both predicted and unexpected places, such as in the case of Stockholm Pride 2015, which we analyse below. These points, moreover, could also all be plotted onto a three-dimensional map in which lines indicate the connections between semiotic, material and affective practices, whereas elevations and cavities represent the respective heightening and diminishing of intensities.

Since “a map has multiple entryways” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 14), it is impossible to give an all-encompassing, objective and univocal description of any rhizome, including homonationalism. Rather, what we can do is cast an ethnographic gaze into some nooks and crannies of the rather vast homonationalist landscape. In this article, the choice of these

nooks and crannies – and not other potentially equally relevant spaces – has been dictated by the online trajectories of the authors and their bodily travels around the world.

3.2. *Homonationalism: the mundane life of orientalism*

While Deleuze and Guattari's concepts are useful to grasp the *interconnectedness*, the *spatiality* and the *affective nature* of homonationalist practices, they do not provide us with a ready-made tool-kit for detailed analysis of texts. As a result, we believe that Billig's (1995) theorisation of banal nationalism, augmented with Said's (1994 [1978]) thinking on orientalism, is particularly apt for the deconstruction of apparently mundane forms of homonationalist practices.

To begin with, Billig (1995) alerted us to the apparently 'banal' and less noticeable, but no less pernicious, discursive tactics through which nationalism is (re)produced daily. In his view, our critical attention should be directed less at overtly nationalist moments of flag-waving at sport matches than at the nearly forgotten and taken-for-granted flag that hangs unwaved outside a public building. Similarly, we should not only focus on overt thematisation of the nation e.g. via toponyms (USA, UK, England, Israel), but we should also deconstruct the more subtle "rhetoric of nationhood" which is realised through the apparently trivial usage of certain pronouns and deixis in the daily press and other media, pointing to "the national homeland as the home of the readers" (Billig, 1995: 11) or the viewers.

As part of the rhetoric of nationhood, there is also a "syntax of hegemony," which, as we will see in the next sections, is particularly useful for describing how homonationalism operates discursively. Syntax of hegemony is a rhetorical strategy through which a part of a national community or national territory claims to represent the whole. In this way, syntax of hegemony works metonymically, and is underpinned by universalising undercurrents through which "sectional interests [are presented] as if they were universal ones" (Billig, 1995: 166). As we will see in the case of the discursive construction of Tel Aviv, syntax of hegemony also has an ambiguously twofold spatial aspect. Paradoxically, Tel Aviv is simultaneously cast as a metonym of Israel – it stands for Israel in its marketing to international audiences – and is simultaneously removed from Israel.

Such a paradoxical representation of Tel Aviv as both part of and detached from Israel is made possible by an underlying orientalist ideology of Western colonialism, which fosters "the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny and so on" (Said, 1994 [1978]: 2). This is an opposition, one should add, that is not value-free but is used to legitimise a view of the West as consistently more progressive and enlightened than its "backward" counterpart, the East. Following this logic, for Israel to appear as a more progressive nation-state than any other country in the Middle East, it needs to present itself through a neo-colonial orientalist lens. As we will show in more detail below, orientalism takes the discursive manifestation of the metonymy of Tel Aviv as a 'Western,' secular, sexual haven for non-heterosexual constituencies vis-à-vis its 'Eastern,' sexually retrograde, Muslim neighbours. However, Jewish conservative religious undercurrents *within* Israel that are critical of any non-heterosexual behaviour disturb the coherence of the Western secular metonymy. As a consequence, Tel Aviv needs "deterritorialising" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) from Israel appearing like a "bubble" in an unspecified Middle East or requires "reterritorialising" itself in other progressive Western democracies, like Stockholm on the occasion of the annual Pride celebrations.

Overall, we believe that the notion of the rhizome, together with an attention to banal orientalist practices, allow us to shed light on some of the vectors through which homonationalism traverses online spaces and the materiality of the built environment "by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 23). It is some of these connections that we investigate in the following sections.

4. Israel and its syntax of hegemony: Tel Aviv, gay, freedom

We want to begin our trajectory by looking at an early news report on the Brand Israel Campaign. Entitled "Israel thinks out of the box to boost tourism," the article was published online on December 4, 2005 by *Israel 21c*, a US-based organisation that defines itself as a "non-partisan, nonprofit organisation [...] founded in 2001, in the wake of the second intifada, to broaden public understanding of Israel beyond typical portrayals in the mainstream media" (<http://www.israel21c.org/about/>). Written by the American-born journalist Allison Kaplan Sommer, the article summarises the (then) new strategy of the Ministry of Tourism to re-brand Israel in order shift international perceptions of the country, boosting its attractiveness as a tourist destination (see also Heller et al., 2014 for an excellent special issue on the sociolinguistics of tourism, which, despite its focus on understanding how tourism is "a prime site of social categorisation and distinction" (Heller et al., 2014: 430), pays scant attention to the role played by gender and sexual diversity in the production of national distinction).

As Van Dijk (1977) reminds us, titles are "macropropositions" that frame, summarise, and foreground what will be said later. In the case of the article under investigation here, it is quite obvious that the title paints the following content with positive tones. To think out of the box is indicative of innovative ideas that have not been explored before. Having set the tone, the article opens with a brief summary of a tourism "comeback" in Israel after a multi-year "drop and virtual disappearance of foreign visitors," which, although the journalist does not mention it, is most likely to have ensued as a result of the start of the second Intifada in 2001. The remainder of the article is a typical piece of news reporting in which the journalist's voice is interspersed with those of academics, business people and self-identified "gay" journalists, who are not only sources of

relevant information, but, because of their institutional position and sexual identity, also provide legitimacy to the very content of the article. One of these is Eli Ziv, the Director-General of the Israel Hotel Association, who, we are told,

Extract 1

recently unveiled the launch of a revolutionary new campaign specifically to attract gay and lesbian tourists to his city, developed at the initiative of, and in cooperation with, the city's gay and lesbian advocacy groups.

"The effort was born after the Tel Aviv homosexual community came to us, and explained that Tel Aviv as a tourism product was highly attractive to the gay market, which is an incredible group of travel consumers eager to go to destinations that are friendly to their community," Ziv said. "We want to highlight the fact that the rich culture and nightlife of Tel Aviv is open to everyone."

Indeed, Israel is the only country in the Middle East where homosexuality between consenting adults in private is neither illegal nor persecuted by the authorities, and Tel Aviv has the most gay-friendly culture in the region.

This extract contains a few elements that are recurrent throughout the corpus of data and can be explained with the help of Billig's (1995) and Said's (1994 [1978]) theoretical notions of syntax of hegemony and orientalism. To begin with, superlative devices ("the only", "the most gay-friendly") are the linguistic manifestation of a discourse of *exceptionalism* through which Israel is heralded as a unique beacon of sexual democracy within an otherwise retrograde and homophobic Middle East. Tel Aviv is then made to stand out even more in its singularity with regard to non-normative sexualities. Whereas the title of the article and the Ministry of Tourism's aim is to re-brand Israel as a whole, it becomes increasingly clearer that the flagship of this strategy – the "revolutionary" aspect of it – is actually the promotion of one particular section of the country: Tel Aviv. By the same token, while the identity label "lesbian" is employed four times throughout the article, always in the cluster "gay and lesbian," (see also the extract above), "gay" and its derivatives (e.g. "gay-friendly") has eleven occurrences. Never are the categories "bisexual" or "transgender" mentioned in the article. In light of this, one could argue that the preference for the label "gay" is not innocuous but performs important ideological work in that it promotes and gives visibility to a specific gendered section of the larger Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer (LGBTQ) group, and thus elevates it as the representative par excellence of that very group.

Such an ambivalent attitude to the usage of sexual and gender identity categories is also encapsulated in the official webpage of Tel Aviv Gay Vibe (Picture 1 and Extract 2), which is dominated by a large picture portraying four beautiful, smiling young people – two slim women and two men, one muscular, one toned – and a screaming drag queen.

Extract 2

Rising from the golden shores of the Mediterranean, stands one of the most intriguing and exciting new gay capitals of the world – TEL AVIV.

This dashing piece of gay heaven holds within the perfect combination for a perfect vacation for men and women: gorgeous guys dancing at the hottest clubs, stunningly beautiful women enjoying our pure shores, modern & contemporary art galleries, cutting-edge fashion, local & international cuisine, history-filled streets hosting the latest urban chic and amazing sunsets, only welcoming a night to remember, in the city that never sleeps.

The screenshot shows the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe website. At the top, there is a logo for 'TEL AVIV GAY VIBE' and a partnership with 'strat' and 'strat'. Below the logo is a navigation bar with 'TEL AVIV GUIDE', 'DISCOVER TEL AVIV', and 'MEET LOCALS'. Underneath the navigation bar is a large image of four young people (two men and two women) smiling. To the right of the image is an 'EVENTS CALENDAR' for February 2015. Below the calendar is a 'PRIDE 2014' banner and an 'IPHONE APP' download button. The main content area features the text: 'Rising from the golden shores of the Mediterranean, stands one of the most intriguing and exciting new gay capitals of the world - TEL AVIV. This Dashing piece of gay heaven holds within the perfect combination for a perfect vacation for men and women: gorgeous guys dancing at the hottest clubs, stunningly beautiful women enjoying our pure shores, modern & contemporary art galleries, cutting-edge fashion, local & international cuisine, history-filled streets hosting the latest urban chic and amazing sunsets, only welcoming a night to remember, in the city that never sleeps. With its perfect weather, Tel Aviv invites you to have fun, be free and feel fabulous!' Below this text is a 'FUN' logo with the tagline '- We're all about having FUN!'.

Picture 1. © Tel Aviv Gay Vibe website.

With its perfect weather, Tel Aviv invites you to **have fun, be free and feel fabulous!**

Tel Aviv has a magical, unique mixture of people. Like her sisters all over the world – New York, Berlin Paris and Madrid, Tel Aviv draws the free-spirited people from all over the country, allowing them to live their lives as they choose. Gay, Lesbian, transgender or bisexual – At all ages, people are free to live, love, work, create and enjoy the cultural and social oasis that is Tel Aviv. (bold sections in original)

Once again, there is an attempt to flag up some of the heterogeneity that characterises the LGBTQ “community”, both in the picture and in the accompanying text. However, the overall prodominance of “gay” both in the title of website (“Tel Aviv Gay Vibe”) and in the text testifies to the privileging of male same-sex interests at the expense of lesbian and transgender ones. Sexual identity tensions notwithstanding, what needs highlighting is how Tel Aviv is discursively constructed for marketing purposes. The density of superlatives and absolute adjectives (“most intriguing,” “latest,” “perfect,” “gorgeous”) is not dissimilar to other promotional materials for consumerist purposes. What is distinctive here is how the hyperbolic tones imbue Tel Aviv with unparalleled traits, and build upon the introductory image of the city in quasi-divine terms. The references are for obvious reasons not those of Judeo-Christian tradition, which are critical – hateful even – of non-heterosexual behaviour, but those of Classical Greece, which is often taken as an example *par excellence* of same-sex tolerance. Interestingly, however, mythology says that the goddess Aphrodite was born out of the foam of the Mediterranean and was deposited on the shores of what is today’s Cyprus, not Israel.

Such a construction of Tel Aviv as a mythological “gay heaven” also contributes to “deterritorialising” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) the city, detaching it from the specific political space of Israel and “reterritorialising” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) it as part of the fuzzier geographical basin of the Mediterranean. It is within this de-politicised maritime portrayal that Tel Aviv is further presented through the exoticising image of a “cultural and social oasis” that draws “free-spirited” individuals “from all over the country.” It is reasonable to conjecture that, if Tel Aviv is an “oasis” of sexual freedom, then the surrounding territories are by implication a constraining “desert.” In this way, a subtle allusion is made to the rather unequal status of non-heterosexual people across different parts of Israel, although it is not mentioned that freedom of movement is not absolute but is dependent on a variety of factors such as ethnicity/nationality and social class. Moreover, because of its position in a text aiming at marketing Tel Aviv as a tourist destination, freedom in this context does not relate to the choice of living one’s own sexual identity openly but bears the traits of what geographers Bell and Binnie (2010: 99) call the “lifestylization of sexual politics”, a neoliberal form of governmentality that promises the aspiration towards a spuriously infinite possibility of choices premised on consumption practices and the lifestyle(s) associated with them.

Overall, the examples in this section testify to a threefold process of syntax of hegemony at work in the branding of Israel in terms of sexual and gender diversity. Homonationalism works by promoting Tel Aviv as a metonym of Israel, consumption practices as a metonym of freedom, and male same-sex identity and desire as a metonym of sexual non-normativity more broadly.

5. The material and embodied facets of homonationalism

Whereas in the previous section we looked at the “imaginative geographies” (Said, 1994 [1978]) of Israel – how its space is talked *about* for marketing purposes – we now move on to explore how that imagined intersection of space, gender, and sexuality is *inscribed* through bodies and the materiality of the urban environment (see also Stroud and Mpendukana, 2006; Milani, 2015; Peck and Stroud, 2015). We begin with an exploration of how the syntax of hegemony – free, gay, Tel Aviv – illustrated in the previous section is “reterritorialised” and takes material shape in the context of Stockholm Pride 2015. We then investigate how this syntax of hegemony is recast as a proxy of a civilisation in need of defence in the context of Tel Aviv Pride 2013.

Pride events are quasi-global phenomena that serve as tokens of remembrance of the 1969 Stonewall revolt in New York City, an uprising that has been elevated to a quasi-mythical status as the beginning of the political emancipation of homosexuals in and outside of the United States. Typically involving a march or a parade, Prides function as a spatial tactic for non-normative sexualities to momentarily re-claim parts of the cityscape and thus make themselves visible for audiences of (un) supportive onlookers.

Stockholm Pride is arranged by a non-profit organisation – *Stiftelsen Stockholm Pride* – as a week-long series of cultural and recreational events that take place in two main venues: Pride House and Pride Park. Whereas the former hosts a variety of talks on issues of gender and sexuality in the Culture House in the heart of Stockholm, Pride Park is the hub of the festivities, just outside the centre in one of the city’s largest sport facilities. With two stages, where the performances of different artists and other celebrities take place, the park is otherwise structured like a fun-fair with rows of tents of similar shape where non-profit organisations, political parties, restaurants and profitable enterprises display and/or sell their goods and services to visitors. Exhibitors need to apply for permission and subsequently pay a considerable fee in order to be allocated a space in the park. What’s particularly novel in the case of Stockholm Pride 2015 is the presence of Tel Aviv as one of the exhibitors at Pride Park (Picture 2 below).

Positioned next to the strategic passage between the restaurant area and the main exhibitors’ space, the tent of Tel Aviv could not go unnoticed by anyone who visited the park. A friendly man wearing a pink T-shirt emblazoned with “I ♥ Tel Aviv” gave passers-by cloth bags (Picture 3 below) with a similar message of affection for the city and handed out leaflets promoting



Picture 2. A “piece of Israel” in Stockholm.



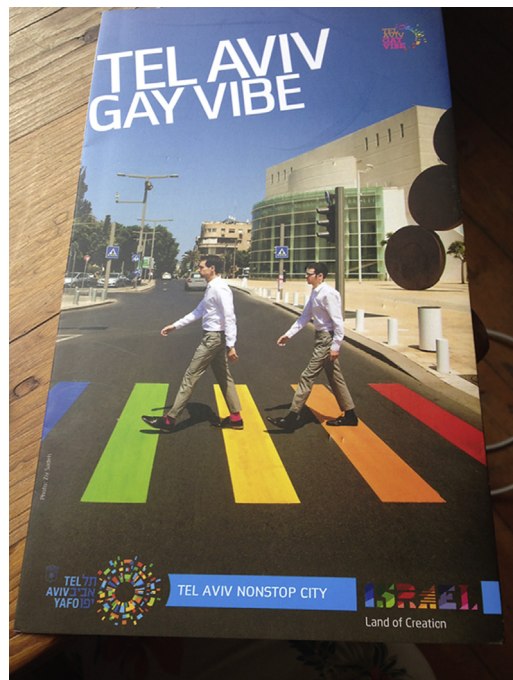
Picture 3. I love Tel Aviv bag.

“Tel Aviv Nonstop City” (Picture 5 below), while a brawny security guard with an earphone sticking out of an open collar shirt stood nearby overseeing the interactions.

As was the case of the online text analysed in the previous section (Extract 2), in both the T-shirt and the bag, Tel Aviv is “deterritorialised” from the political space of Israel, though in this case it is not positioned in the geographical space of the Mediterranean but is re-cast as part of a global discourse of affective practices linked to consumption. Such a globalising strategy is realised semiotically through language ideological affordances linked to the choice of English (the first person singular pronoun “I”) and the red heart. On the one hand, English is something of a second rather than a foreign language in Israel and carries connotations of modernity and globalisation especially when used in public signage (Shohamy, 2006). On



Picture 4. *Matkot* competition © Israeliska Statens Turistbyrå.



Picture 5. © Tel Aviv Gay Vibe leaflet distributed at Stockholm Pride.

the other hand, the heart “is arguably one of the most common, graphic elements of the global semioscape linking commerce with affect” (Jaworski, 2015a: 228; see also Jaworski, 2015b).

These globalising tactics notwithstanding, Tel Aviv is “reterritorialised” with the help of particular linguistic and material artifacts. The deck chair and the strip of sand in front of the tent are meant to re-create the feeling of a sunny beach in Tel Aviv in the otherwise chilly and rainy Swedish summer weather. Moreover, as was also advertised by the Israel Government Tourist Office for the Nordic countries on Facebook, the sand plays host to a competition of a type of beach tennis, the winner of which would be awarded “a dream trip for two people to Tel Aviv including flight, accommodation and tickets to [the musical] *Mamma Mia*” (see [Picture 4](#) above).

Unlike the globalising function connected to the heart and the English language on the T-shirt and on the bag, the code-mixing of Hebrew and Swedish (*matkot tävling*) contributes to localising the competition to the Swedish context, and simultaneously (re)attaching it to a *traditionally* Israeli leisure practice. At the same time, the image of two young men playing *matkot* on a Tel Aviv beach against the backdrop of the Old City of Jaffa at sunset offers an alluring glimpse of the carefree freedom, which, as we saw in [Extract 2](#) above, is so characteristic of this city. Analogous to the elite tourism material analyzed by [Thurlow and Jaworski \(2010\)](#), the visual and emotional appeal of the image lies in the silence that enfolds it, occasionally punctuated by the regular sound of the ball hitting the racquet, the natural crashing of the waves against the shore, or the movement of a gentle breeze. In this context, however, silence is not simply indexical of undisturbed leisure, but also signifies the troublesome erasure of Tel Aviv’s past. What remains unsaid is the history of Palestinian dispossession in Jaffa, the Hebrew renaming of the city to Yafo, the merger with Tel Aviv into a single municipality (Tel Aviv-Yafo), and the complete absence of Arabic from a piece of official advertising campaign, despite the status of Arabic as an official language of Israel *on par* with Hebrew (see also [Shohamy, 2006](#)).

What is also noticeable in [Picture 4](#) is the nearly complete absence of women in the marketing material promoting Tel Aviv. As we saw in [Extract 2](#) above, the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe website promises a nearly heavenly experience for both sexes, and does feature two women in the picture on its main webpage. However, men – typically young, slim, muscled or in drag – dominate the promotional landscape of the city (see also [Pictures 5 and 6](#)). Such visual choices testify to and simultaneously reinforce the linguistic syntax of hegemony that, through the category “gay”, foregrounds the g-section of the larger LGBT constituency. The visual privilege accorded to the visibility of gay male identity reached one of its peaks during the Stockholm Pride Parade, where the Israeli Tourist Board was present in the shape of a human-sized costume representing a rugged man with beard stubble ready for the beach in his sandals, bandana, and Hawaii trunks ([Picture 7](#)).

The image of a hairy muscled man to signify Israel is not particularly new but has a long history within Zionism; it embodies the *sabra* (lit. prickly pear), the young, strong, masculine Jew, who, unlike its older, more “feminine,” and weaker counterpart in the diaspora, would build the state of Israel ([Levon, 2010; Cohen, 2012](#)). Historically the *sabra* “was the blueprint for the heterosexual and militaristic society Israel has turned out to be” ([Cohen, 2012: 20](#)), a society that was further imagined around the attraction between two gendered opposites: men as soldiers and women as mothers ([Levon, 2010](#)). The coherence of this heteronormative narrative could only be guaranteed through the exclusion of sexual non-normativities from the national imaginary ([Levon, 2010, 2015](#)). In light of this ideological background, the gay or gay-friendly but no less masculine incarnation of the *sabra* to represent Israel at Stockholm Pride can be taken as an indication of the inclusion of non-normative sexualities within Israeli nationalist discourse. However, in this specific example, it is not so much that “gayness and the culturally ‘feminine’ signifiers that are attributed to it [...] [are] integral to the construction of Zionist-Israeli identity” ([Cohen, 2012: 21](#); summarising [Solomon, 2004](#)). Nor is it the case that “the positive value ascribed by Zionism to the soft Sabra and the state’s reliance on its



Picture 6. © Tel Aviv Gay Vibe leaflet distributed at Stockholm Pride.



Picture 7. Israel as *sabra* at Stockholm Pride parade.

vulnerability to achieve international sympathy are signifiers that are as important as the hypermasculine nature of the army” (Cohen, 2012: 21). Quite the contrary, it is the hypermasculine character of the traditional figure of the *sabra* that is skilfully mobilised for the “economic exploitation of eroticization” (Foucault, 1980: 57). Muscular virility here and in other promotional material is skilfully deployed in order to tickle the “pornographic imagination” (Sontag, 2002) of international viewers, and thus generate a global attraction for a normative ideal of Israeli masculinity, and, by proxy, for Israel. And while it is the leisure sporty facet of the gay *sabra* that it is foregrounded here for marketing purposes, his warrior-like “double” is never too far away, as will appear in the example from Tel Aviv Pride, to which we now turn.

In the case of Tel Aviv, Pride is organised and financed by the local municipality; the parade usually takes place on the first or second Friday in June concluding a week of parties and other events dedicated to non-normative sexualities. The parade starts from *Gan Meir* Park, an important site for the Israeli LGBT community hosting the offices of the *Agudah* and the memorial to holocaust victims on the basis of their sexuality. After a few kilometres’ walk through the city centre, the parade ends with a party on Hilton beach, which, according to Tel Aviv City Guide is “the unofficial gay beach where Tel Aviv’s vibrant and growing gay community go to surf, tan, swim, and show off pecks and abs” (<http://www.cityguide.co.il/tel-aviv-areas/west/tel-aviv-beaches/hilton-beach/>). As mentioned above, Tel Aviv Pride is perhaps the most successful event in terms of “pink tourism,” every year attracting thousands of visitors from all over the world. While walking through the crowd at Gain Meir Park waiting for the parade to start, one of us was drawn to an apparently inconspicuous white T-shirt, which nevertheless stuck out among the many colourful outfits of the awaiting crowd.

As Milani and Kapa point out, T-shirts worn at Pride events can be important material entextualisations of “ready-to-wear sexual politics” (2015: 79) in that they are used to strategically “foreground certain nexus points of gender, sexuality and other social categories, while simultaneously *backgrounding* or *erasing* others” (2015: 80, emphasis in original). In the case of the T-shirt below, it is the link between sexuality and nationalism that is highlighted, offering a textbook example of the often forgotten militaristic facet that underpins Tel Aviv’s “gay friendliness” (See Picture 8).

The complex intersection of national, global and rights discourses is rendered semiotically through the deployment of specific linguistic and visual choices. Through the usage of imperative forms, the viewer is strongly urged not to surrender and defend civilisation by embarking on a fight against *jihad*. This is a controversial term that is often translated as the “Holy War” but that, as some scholars maintain, may indicate a more abstract, inner commitment to “applying oneself” or “striving in the way of God”. The letters of the verb “defend” are realised visually in rainbow colours, and thus bear a strong intertextual resonance with the numerous rainbow flags waved by the other bystanders at Gan Meir Park. Needless to say, rainbow colours, together with the pink triangle, have a long history as a key signifier of the LGBT agenda globally. Crucially, the juxtaposition of the rainbow colours with the word “civilization” indicates how LGBT rights are taken as the benchmark of what is considered the most advanced form of human development; by implication, the lack of such rights is viewed as an index of backwardness or sheer barbarity.

On the “good” side, the flags on the upper section of the T-shirt “territorialise” civilisation, linking it to specific national contexts. If the dimensions of a flag here are to be taken as directly proportional to the degree of human development, then



Picture 8. Ready-to-wear homonationalist politics – Tel Aviv Pride 2013.

Israel is represented quite unsurprisingly as the most advanced society, above the United States and England. Issues of size aside, the visual juxtaposition of the Israeli flag to those of the USA and England contributes to positioning Israel within the 'West' or the 'North' of the World. Interestingly, the choice of St. George's cross, rather than of the Union Jack, foregrounds a national section within the United Kingdom (see also Johnson et al., 2010). The highlighting of Englishness is reinforced further by the inclusion of the flag of the English Defence League, a far-right street protest movement that rallies *inter alia* LGBT sentiments against Islam.

In contrast, the enemies of LGBT rights are clearly singled out by way of a row of crossed out flags, which work once again as powerful visual devices of territorialisation and deterritorialisation. While the flags of the Palestinian Authority and Saudi Arabia link *jihād* to two specific national contexts, the insignia of the Muslim Brotherhood dislocates the specific national provenance of a perceived threat by placing it within a global Islamic network. Particularly significant are the inverted commas on each side of the flag of the Palestinian Authority. By putting a prime symbol of national identification in scare quotes, an apparently banal typographic device is deployed with the ideological aim of questioning the legitimacy of the very existence of a Palestinian nation-state.

Of course we are not the first ones to interrogate the creation of links between the recognition of LGBT issues and civilisation in homonationalist discourses. Activists and academics involved in "pinkwashing"⁴ have been doing it for quite some time (<http://www.pinkwashingisrael.com>; see also Puar and Mikdashi, 2012 as well as Schotten and Maikey, 2012). And in line with these politically engaged social actors, we certainly do not mean to convey that LGBT rights are wrong or should not be pursued. Rather, with our example above, we wanted to illustrate how such recognition (or lack thereof) may be employed with an orientalising purpose (Said, 1994 [1978]: 43) creating a clear-cut dyadic opposition between (1) a human, civilised and superior Western self, to which Israel is included by association; and (2) an inhuman, uncivilised and inferior Oriental other. This division is problematic because it not only erases the activities of Palestinian queer activist organisations such as *al-Qaws* in the Occupied Territories, but also homogenises and idealises the reality of non-normative sexualities in Israel, which might indeed be "one of the most progressive nations in the world with respect to rights of its lesbian and gay citizens [...]. Yet despite these legal advances over the past 20 years, lesbians and gays remain largely excluded from full participation in Israeli society" (Levon, 2010: 7; see also, e.g., Gross, 2010).

In sum, the Pride events in Stockholm and Tel Aviv provide us with two entry points into the embodiment of the "imaginative geography" (Said, 1994 [1978]) that paints over the contours of the national space of Israel with certain shades of gender and sexuality. Israel takes the bodily shape of the historical cultural model of national masculinity – the *sabra*. By departing from the heterosexual norm of his origins, the "gay-friendly" *sabra* might be going against the historical grain. His sexual non-normativity, though, is not tantamount to unsettling gender norms. Unlike the soft, feminine

⁴ Pinkwashing encompasses all the activities that seek "to expose and resist Israeli pinkwashing – the cynical use of gay rights to distract from and normalise Israeli occupation, settler colonialism, and apartheid" (<http://www.pinkwashingisrael.com>).

version studied in existing literature on Israeli nationalism in popular and visual culture (Solomon, 2004), the “gay friendly” *sabra* embodying Tel Aviv/Israel is no less masculine than his heterosexual counterpart, and thus (re)produces rather than contests gendered stereotypes of national masculinity. On one hand, the virile muscular body is strategically deployed as affective bait that exploits global middle-class gay men’s obsession with masculinity (Altman, 1997) in order to seduce visitors to Tel Aviv and Israel with the promise of sexual freedom and a carefree experience. On the other hand, his inner warrior-like nature is ready to embark on a war to defend sexual rights, which are taken as proxies of the outer boundaries of the civilised world.

6. Affective attachments: multilingual complicities and the banal legitimation of homonationalism

While the focus in the previous sections was mainly on state-driven enterprises branding Israel through the image of a “gay-friendly” Tel Aviv, too much attention to official promotional material may lead to treating the Israeli state apparatus as “a totalizing logic, an ordered hierarchy, a comprehensive rationality, a unity of purpose and execution,” (Currah, 2013: np), failing to interrogate “the local, micro, particular sites where public authority is being exercised” (Currah, 2013: np) and complicities are forged. With a view to capturing this macro-micro synergy, Puar urges that, “while it is crucial to challenge the Israeli state, it must be done in a manner that acknowledges the range of complicit actors” (2013, 338). Furthermore, we illustrated above that there is a key affective component to homonationalism, one that seeks to generate desire for the *sabra*, and Tel Aviv, among global constituencies of gay men. In light of this, then, it is important to understand whether, and if so, how these global audiences contribute to publically endorse and authenticate such desire, and thereby collude in the reproduction and circulation of homonationalist attachments.

An interesting example of banal collusion in homonationalism is offered by a video in which the photographer and visual artist Omer Shalev documents the experiences of a group of foreign tourists on Hilton Beach. Originally shot during Tel Aviv Pride 2012, the video was subsequently embedded into the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe page as another visual and textual device through which to attract viewers to the following year Pride festivities. The video is structured as a series of short messages about Tel Aviv given in 10 different languages by a series of male tourists of 15 nationalities, all young or middle-aged, slim or muscular. Though it is impossible to know to what extent the men’s comments were scripted and/or rehearsed, the video is clearly designed to resemble a *vox pop* in which gay men from around the world spontaneously describe their own feelings about Tel Aviv and its gay community.

In terms of the content of their messages, the speakers nearly unanimously mention their attraction to Israeli men, and employ an aesthetic judgement on Israeli masculinity as a justification for a positive stance on Tel Aviv and Israel more broadly. One man goes as far as saying, in Swedish, that Tel Aviv is the “best place in the world” (*världens bästa ställe*). This unmitigated superlative endorsement of the space of Tel Aviv finds temporal resonance in the no less absolute statement that “everyone should come to Tel Aviv at least once in their lifetime”, uttered in Mandarin.

It is precisely the link between masculinity, space and time that is the common denominator that runs through all the short messages in the video. While the men have recently arrived for Tel Aviv Pride 2012, they deploy a series of linguistic strategies through which they encourage viewers to visit Tel Aviv the following year, as can be seen in the message from an Italian speaker below. It is important to mention that the English subtitles provided in the video are not always a faithful translation of the original language (See [Picture 9](#)).



Picture 9. Next year in Tel Aviv © Omer Shalev.

Extract 3

*Mi raccomando, venite il prossimo anno
Vi aspettiamo e vi aspettano gli Israeliani
Un bacio*

Trust me, come next year!

We'll be waiting for you, and Israeli men will [also] be waiting for you

A kiss

Despite its brevity and the apparently mundane nature of the content, this message does important interactional work. Starting from the end, the closing *bacio* ('kiss') in Italian (and other languages) is typical of the genre of spoken and written interactions between relatively close friends. Likewise, the expression *mi raccomando* ('trust me') is a colloquial device of epistemic modality that conveys a speaker's exhortation to trust the veracity of the propositional content of his/her utterance. These linguistic choices, together with the close-up shot and the demand gaze looking straight into the camera, are multi-modal strategies through which a degree of *synthetic intimacy* (see also Talbot, 1995) is produced between an imagined community of "us" (including the speaker), on the one hand, and a set of equally imagined audiences (*vi* in Italian indicates 2nd person plural), on the other. Of course, it is always impossible to pin down with absolute certainty the referents of "we" and "you" because of the property of these personal pronouns to "wander" (Peterson, 2007) and encompass several different referents at the same time. However, the complete erasure of female voices – there are only three women seen but not heard in the background in the whole video – and the gendered form of the Italian noun *Israeliani* ('Israeli men') seem to suggest that the "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) invoked in the message are those of global gay men engaged in a synthetically intimate conversation giving each other advice about the best tourism destination for the best "gay experience." Such a global community of consumers is also invoked in the message of a man visually identified as a dual national of Syria and the UK (see Picture 10 and Extract 4 below).

Extract 4

مرحبا نحنا اليوم بتل ابيب في البحر
فيه عدة ناس من كل اماكن العالم
وكتير مبسوطين انو هون
فيه بحر حلو ناس حلوين وتل ابيب مدينة كتير حلوه
و اهلا و سهلا فيكن كلكم
شكرا

Hi. We are today in Tel Aviv at the sea.

There are people from all over the world.

We are very happy to be here. It is a beautiful sea.

Tel Aviv is a very beautiful city.

Welcome (traditional Arabic welcoming phrase: *Ahlan wa Sahlan*) all here.

Thanks



Picture 10. People from all over the world in Tel Aviv © Omer Shalev.

The other nationalities included in the video (Australia, China, Germany, Greece, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, the USA) are not particularly remarkable because they represent polities with whom Israel has had a history of relatively friendly relations. What is significant instead is the inclusion of a Syrian/British man, not least because Syria has never recognised the state of Israel and the relationship between the two countries has always been very tense. These diplomatic frictions between the two countries entailed *inter alia* the curtailing of the right of entry into each other's territories for their respective citizens. Against this backdrop, it is possible to speculate that this man's access to Israel was facilitated by the wielding of a British, rather than a Syrian, passport.

Whether this man really has dual citizenship or not, though, is less relevant than understanding the symbolic function that dual nationality plays in this video. Here dual national identification is attributed to the man through a flag split crossways, where each half is occupied by a diagonal section of the Syrian and the UK flags, respectively. While the insignia of the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia and the Muslim brotherhood were treated as symbols of "Oriental" danger to "Western" civilisation in the T-shirt represented in [Picture 8](#) above, here the potentially intimidating nature of a historical enemy – Syria – is toned down by a visual association with a Western European supporter of Israel – the UK. In this way, dual nationality works as a rather unthreatening authenticating device through which a Syrian man plays the part of a mundane peace ambassador, who not only acknowledges the aesthetic features of Tel Aviv, but also ratifies the role of this city as a paradise where "people from all over the world" – Arab speakers included – can be happy together. Such an endorsement of the inclusive nature of the city is further conveyed linguistically through the traditional Arabic welcoming expression *Ahlan wa Sahlan*, where *Ahlan* means "family" and *Sahlan* indicates "flat and/or fertile land." The English translation provided in the subtitles of the video – "I encourage you to come and see it" – puts the emphasis on an individualistic relationship between the speaking self and the audience. A more literal translation – "[May you] arrive as part of the family, and tread easily [as you enter]" – would instead highlight more precisely the inclusion of an imagined interlocutor into an existing collective, the family of gay men in Tel Aviv.

Viewed together, the talking heads in the video function as a sequence of multilingual united colours of gay men, who put words to the global gay's sense of belonging to Tel Aviv. Through their unanimous appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of Israeli men as a reason to visit the city, these men also contribute to generating global affective attachments to Israeli masculinity and to Israel. Moreover, the individual men's national identifications visually indicated by the flags of their respective countries confer multinational legitimacy to the image of Tel Aviv as a "dashing piece of gay heaven" (Extract 2 above). And while these men are keen to *remind* global constituencies of gay peers to visit Tel Aviv, in their pursuit of a one-sided visually pleasing masculine experience in the city, they are complicit in circulating the *forgetting* of Israel's more ambiguous and multi-faceted attitude to sexuality issues, which include *inter alia* the harsh treatment and expulsion of undocumented self-identified gay men who leave the Occupied Territories in order to move to Tel Aviv ([Kagan and Ben-Dor, 2008](#)).

7. Conclusion

Our goal in this article has been to illustrate some of the semiotic complexity of pinkwashing and homonationalism in the Israeli context, a complexity that we argue is inadequately modelled by a perspective that focuses solely on the "agentive" or "intentional" actions of the state. Instead, we draw on a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives to demonstrate how a series of seemingly mundane practices involving an intricate web of state, para-state and non-state actors contribute to pinkwashing, and hence to the reproduction of Israeli homonationalism. Our analysis is sustained by [Deleuze and Guattari's \(2004\)](#) conceptualisation of the rhizome, a concept that allowed us to capture the *connectivity* between a diverse set of homonational discursive practices (e.g., the Tel Aviv Gay Vibe website), bodily/material/spatial tactics (e.g., the "gay Tel Aviv" booth at Stockholm Pride), and professed affective attachments (e.g., the comments of foreign tourists at the beach). What needs highlighting is the nearly chameleon-like variability of the homonationalist rhizome, which makes it difficult to pin it down: sometimes Tel Aviv acts as a metonymy for Israel, sometimes it is more like a bubble detached from any national territory. We would argue, moreover, that these different homonational events are themselves connected to a larger social and discursive history in Israel – one in which elements of democratic liberalism have long been incorporated into the prevailing (republican) model of Israeli nationalism and have been strategically deployed at key historical moments to legitimise a range of colonialist and oppressive practices. In this sense, we suggest that one can read the Israeli homonationalist rhizome as a particular manifestation of the larger rhizomatic structure of Zionism. As predicted by Deleuze and Guattari's framework, it is a manifestation that emerged at a specific point of *rupture* within the larger Zionist narrative and that, since its emergence, has taken on a *multiplicity* of forms. Our arguments thus support [Puar's \(2011, 2013\)](#) claims regarding the origins and effects of homonationalism in Israel, and, crucially, provide much needed empirical detail regarding the specific ways that homonationalism circulates through a range of linguistic and other semiotic practices.

Providing this kind of close analysis of how Israeli homonationalism operates is important since, by all accounts, the pinkwashing project is working. Tel Aviv was voted the "best gay city in the world" by the website [GayCities.com](#) in 2012, and consistently ranks within the site's annual top ten. More recently, the international travel conglomerate WOW! Travel ranked Tel Aviv the "most gay friendly" city in the world in 2015, and actively encouraged lesbian and gay consumers to travel there. We do not cite these rankings in order to dispute the facts upon which they are based, nor do we necessarily wish to

discourage LGBT individuals from travelling to Israel. Tel Aviv and, to a lesser extent, all of Israel are “gay friendly” places, and, as Puar (2011: 139) states, “there is no question that Israel’s legal record on gay rights suggests a certain notion of liberal ‘progress’”. But the point we wish to make is that Tel Aviv’s “gay friendliness” and Israel’s “progressiveness” toward LGBT individuals is only part of the story, a story that also includes the use of lesbian and gay enfranchisement in Israel to erase and obscure the ongoing repression of Palestinians and others who do not fit within the Zionist conception of the state. When viewed from this perspective, identifying Tel Aviv as the “best gay city in the world” risks perpetuating Israel’s dominant national narrative, thus rendering a variety of LGBT and other constituencies complicit in the harmful effects this narrative helps to engender.

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