Dr. Jacob Breslow
Assistant Professor of Sexuality and Gender
LSE Department of Gender Studies
j.breslow@lse.ac.uk

"Flirting with the Islamic State":

Queer Childhood with a Touch of Contemporary Sexual Politics

Abstract:

This article interrogates how queerness, as signified by the queer child, operates in a contemporary US culture jointly defined by homonationalism and #MeToo. Using the queer child as its fulcrum, it argues that part of what sustains the pervasive failure to hold privileged individuals accountable for their sexual abuses is an exceptionalist discourse which only locates childhood desire, and child abuse, elsewhere. It establishes this by analyzing a 2015 article and documentary by the *New York Times* about a young American woman, represented as a child, who was radicalized by the flirtatious seduction of online recruiters from Daesh. The analysis undertakes a queer reading of the flirtations and touches within the documentary, attending to its visualizations of seduction, embrace, and desire. Unpacking the sexual touch of the racialized discourses of so-called grooming, it opens up new ways of understanding the relationship between childhood sexuality, sexual abuse, and contemporary sexual politics.

Keywords:

Islamophobia, queer theory, childhood, homonationalism, sexual politics, grooming, sexual harassment

> In recent years, both government (including the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI) and community groups have become involved in efforts to educate communities about online radicalization. […] NCTC [the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center]—in collaboration with other government agencies and Muslim community groups—has run three Internet Safety Workshops in northern Virginia and Seattle, Washington, which have combined sessions about online extremism with information about how to protect children from online predators and pornography. Aimed at Muslim parents, government representatives deliver briefings on the nature of the threat while Muslim community representatives focus on how parents can detect radicalization and "step in early ... [in order to] counter the terrorist theology." (Neumann, 2012: 33)
>
> The Government Accountability Office published a report in 2011 that found criminal aliens incarcerated in state and local prisons were convicted for 69,929 sex offenses between fiscal years 2003 and 2009. […] TIME TO END CHAIN MIGRATION AND THE VISA LOTTERY. (White House, Fact Sheet "Our Current Immigration System Jeopardizes American Security" 2018)
>
> I did try and fuck her. She was married. And I moved on her very heavily. […] You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything. (Trump, 2016)

These three epigraphs present three seemingly separate junctures. The first, from a 2012 report titled "Countering Online Radicalization in America" suggests that American children, Muslim ones in particular, are increasingly becoming seduced by conjoined online threats: pedophiles and extremists. The second, from a 2018 White House so-called "fact sheet" seeks to justify President Trump's ban on immigration from seven Muslim-majority nations through the citing of a Government Accountability Office report which argued that "foreign aliens" (a statistically insignificant number of whom, it should be said, held citizenship from any of these seven nations) pose a high risk to American citizens for their committing of sex offenses.[1] The final quote is so well known that it probably requires no explanation. In this

[1] While the Governmental Accountability Office (2011) does not break down citizenship status for each of the crimes it reports on, the overall breakdown of "country of citizenship for criminal aliens incarcerated in federal prisons as of December 2010" only names Mexico (68%), Columbia (5%), Dominican Republic (5%), Cuba (3%), Jamaica (2%), El Salvador (2%), Honduras (2%) and Guatemala (1%), leaving open a category titled "remaining 172 countries" (10%). Only 11% of so-called "criminal aliens" are convicted of sex offenses, with the most common conviction being related to immigration, at 65%.

clandestine statement, Trump brags about his history of, and propensity for, sexually assaulting women. Unlike the former two statements, which both conflated sexual, racial, and national threat in order to justify the exclusion of and surveillance over Muslim populations, the latter self-admission of Trump's history of sexual violence did not warrant a federal inquisition into the sexual threat that white men pose to the United States and its citizens.

The failure of this latter statement to become a general, or indeed even an individual indictment—Trump did become President despite (perhaps because of) this statement—might be understood as an example of what scholars such as Jasbir Puar (2007) and Judith Butler (2007) have described as American exceptionalism. This exceptionalism, which Puar diagnoses in relationship to her theorization of homonationalism, and which Butler outlines in relationship to what she calls sexual politics, is grounded upon a fantasy that the United States is the beacon of sexual modernity and progress and thus that it is only elsewhere that sexual judgment and wrongdoing are both tolerated and accepted. For both of these scholars, this exceptionalism has a long history, but its contemporary manifestation can be most perniciously seen in the assertion that the U.S. not only is a vanguard of LGBT rights, but that it is therefore able to evaluate and intervene in other nation's right to, or quality of sovereignty (Puar, 2012). In these three epigraphs, however, the specter of 'LGBT acceptance' might only just be said to be even tangentially present. The 'sexual' of the sexual politics that I am interrogating here, in other words, is not wholly confined to something called homosexuality or homophobia. And yet, I argue in this article that in thinking through these three statements together another facet of sexual politics—one which has consequences for contemporary queer politics, anti-imperial and anti-racist movements, as well as the growing #MeToo movement—can begin to be articulated.

Rather than focus on the particular questions that homosexuality as a nationalist object and signifier of Western "modernity" (vis-à-vis the construction of a "pre-modern"

homophobic Muslim other) raises, my concern here is instead the specific melding of sexual politics with what James Kincaid calls the 'erotification of innocence' (1998). Here, the child, and particularly the 'queer child' (cf. Stockton, 2009; 2016) and the 'Muslim child' find dangerous purchase within contemporary structures of racialization, erotification, disavowal, and desire. The shift this paper is driving at here can begin to be seen within the opening epigraph. In one light, this narrative positions Muslim children as always already in need of surveillance, arrest, and disciplining into "modern" sexual politics. Unlike examples of homonationalism, however, this report's diagnosis of the sexual threat posed by and to Muslim communities has less to do with homosexuals or homophobia, and more to do with online sexual predators. Distinct from Trump's admission of sexual abuse, here, the mere specter of potential sexual predators flirting with Muslim children requires inter-departmental militarized intervention. While Trump's abuse is marked as innocent locker-room masculinity, explicit in this report's celebration of the collaboration between federal agencies and community groups is the suggestion that Muslim children are vulnerable to online grooming from racialized religious communities that subject them to perversion *and* radicalization.

Following this logic, my analysis shifts from an interrogation of the externalization of homophobia as homonationalism's main node, to the externalization of childhood sexual abuse (and even childhood sexual *desire*) as a central characteristic of contemporary Orientalist and Islamophobic sexual politics. In this sense, the Bipartisan Policy Center's bringing together of childhood, sexuality, and state-sanctioned racism and Islamophobia through their focus on online grooming, I argue, marks a specific instantiation—one drawing upon a longer historical legacy—of the contemporary American discursive terrain of sexual politics and state violence operating through the child that this paper seeks to interrogate. Attending to what I call the sexual *touch* of this grooming force, I route homonationalist

literature towards an analysis of the particular work that the child, and specifically the "queer child," engenders within contemporary discourse about Daesh.[2]

The queer child is a queer subject that has proliferated in queer theory (Bruhm and Hurley, 2004; Sedgwick 1991; Stockton 2009; Muñoz 2009; Moon 1991; Halberstam, 2012; Lesnik-Oberstein and Thompson 2002; Stockton, Sheldon and Gill-Peterson, 2016). In the twentieth century, Stockton argues, the child was queered by innocence, forcibly estranged from an adulthood which it was destined to grow into. In the contemporary moment, Stockton recognizes, the confines of "strangeness" which enrapture and ensnare the child are newly-emerging and in need of inventive, perhaps even odd new theoretical capture (Stockton 2016). What, in other words, is the contemporary queer child *queered by*? What forms of sexual estrangement are at play in relationship to the idea of childhood when gay children abound in contemporary representation? Here, I shall argue that one of the sites in which the contemporary queer child emerges is precisely in the Islamophobic discourses on grooming, sexual touch, and flirtation.

I do so by turning to an article and documentary by the *New York Times* (Callimachi 2015) about a woman named "Alex" from the United States who secretly converted to "extremist" Islam from Christianity, allegedly under the behest of online recruiters from Daesh. Interrogating the deployments of sexuality, Islamophobia, and childhood within Alex's story, and placing them in relation to a historical lineage of racist narratives and knowledges about the sexual "perversity" of the racialized Muslim other, this paper seeks to build productive links between the scholarship on sexual politics and on childhood in ways that they might counter the projects of Euro-American empire building, Islamophobia, and sexual violence.

[2] There are many debates about what name to use for Daesh—ISIS, ISIL, and IS being the most common alternatives—and the group itself has changed its name over time. I use Daesh here (when not directly citing the *New York Times*, which uses IS) as a way of avoiding the conflation of Daesh and an "Islamic State."

"Flirting with the Islamic State"

As a counter-point to the Bipartisan Policy Center's about-to-be-radicalized Muslim child, the figure of the sexually and racially vulnerable white child emerges as similarly, yet distinctly, under threat from the touch of the Muslim other. To draw out the ways in which sexuality and childhood are central to the current fears surrounding Daesh, I turn to an article in the *New York Times* from June 2015 titled "ISIS and the Lonely American," as well as to the eight-minute video-documentary which accompanies it, "Flirting with the Islamic State" (Teng and Laffin, 2015). The article and documentary follow the story of a white American woman with the pseudonym "Alex" who was "seduced" by online recruiters from Daesh to convert to Islam, and who was encouraged to join them in "Muslim lands." This reporting, I should note, is not alone in its focus on a young woman joining Daesh, nor is it unique in its gendered use of the language of desire and seduction to characterize this recruitment, and so I unpack it here as emblematic of a larger discourse.[3] Indeed, the language of "grooming," particularly in the array of articles about the three teenage girls from Britain who allegedly travelled to Syria to join Daesh in 2015, is made to characterize the perverse tactics of "jihadi recruitment" of young women. Unlike young men who tend to be represented as recruited and radicalized through their feelings of isolation and anger, the fears which surround young women being radicalized tend to be imbricated with sexuality. In light of this discursive landscape, I argue that we must ask after the sexual, racial, and gendered politics that surround the proliferation of panic within these articles and this rhetoric, precisely because these women make up merely four of the estimated four thousand people from the West (as of 2015) who have joined the soldiers in Daesh (Callimahi 2015). Despite these numbers,

[3] As representative of the gendered nature of this reporting, an article in the *Telegraph* (Whitehead 2014) highlights, and only mentions, six girls who left Britain, despite also noting that five hundred Britons have allegedly gone to Syria.

these four women's presence in the media far outweighs those of others, and, as I argue, their centrality elides broader questions of responsibility by privileging an Orientalist narrative of (sexually) vulnerable women and children.

Alex, the *New York Times* tells us, is a twenty-three-year-old who moved to the "middle of nowhere" in Washington state with her grandparents, where she became lonely and isolated. Social life for Alex consisted solely of the local church and her friends online. Her world changed, however, in 2014, when she heard about the beheading of James Foley, an American journalist who was abducted in Syria by Daesh. "Riveted by the killing," the *New York Times* writes, "and struck by a horrified curiosity, she logged on to Twitter to see if she could learn more" (Callimachi 2015). She thus began speaking with a number of people online, including a man named Faisal Mostafa. To Alex, Faisal was a comforting British Muslim man in his 50s who introduced her to a supportive online community, sent her gifts like clothing, books, and candy, and convinced her that the Western media was unfairly portraying Islam and Daesh. For many nights, Alex and Faisal stayed up late chatting about everything from "gardening tips … to dietary advice" (Callimachi 2015), and Faisal would teach Alex about the Islamic faith. Infatuated by Faisal's attention and gifts, we are told, Alex eventually publicly recited the shahadah (over Twitter) and became a religious convert. Alex's conversion, however, is relayed by the *New York Times* as a tale of warning, predation, and corrupted innocence, as her embrace of Faisal's attention is narrated as her "drifting toward extremism," and is presented as symptomatic of a wider strategy by Daesh of grooming and ensnaring young American girls. Indeed, we quickly learn that Faisal is not an innocent man; instead, he is allegedly a recruiter for Daesh with a criminal history that includes an arrest in Bangladesh in 2009 for "grooming" child militants. Suggesting that his relationship with children is both militaristic and sexual, the *New York Times* tells us that he is desperate for Alex and her eleven-year-old brother to make their way to him so that Alex

can meet her future husband. As such, it is his seeking out and "grooming" of Alex and her young brother, the vulnerable white children that they are constructed as being, which marks Faisal, and by extension Daesh, as an exceptionally perverse predatory force which requires complex militaristic intervention.

The seductiveness of this corrupted childhood innocence narrative clearly enraptured the journalists of the *New York Times* pieces, for while Alex is noted as being twenty three in the documentary, she is consistently portrayed as a child. Staged both in her room hugging, stroking, and petting stuffed animals, and out in an empty playground, the documentary draws upon visual cues of childhood to emphasize Alex's youth and vulnerability. The narration ties her directly to her own childhood—a childhood she is depicted as not yet having left—by placing her in discursive and psychic proximity to her mother and to her own infancy. Alex, we are told, has a "persistent lack of maturity," argued to stem from the fetal alcohol syndrome she suffered at birth, and she is further infantilized by reference to her mother's struggle with drug addiction, a struggle which led to Alex being removed from her mother's custody when she was eleven months old. Narratives of abuse like this work, as Stockton argues in relation to the figure of the child, to endow subjects on the normative outskirts of the frame of "childhood" an access to that frame, as the overemphasis on their vulnerability counters the axes of race, or in this case age, which might normally place a subject beyond childhood's contours (2009: 33). Being additionally described as having symptoms similar to ADHD (a so-called "disorder" primarily diagnosed in children),[4] the *New York Times* reiterates Alex's location within childhood by noting that her therapist diagnosed her as "emotionally immature." It is this emotional vulnerability, the article and the documentary argue, that Faisal exploited to "groom" Alex into converting to an extreme

[4] Prior to the DSM V, introduced in 2013, the diagnostic criteria for an ADHD diagnosis required that symptoms had to occur prior to age six, and the average age of diagnosis was seven years of age. Current diagnostic criteria allows for more leeway for diagnosis in teenagers and adults, with initial symptoms now allowed to occur by age twelve.

version Islam. In this vein, the *New York Times* article establishes the flirtatiousness of Alex's conversion as emblematic of the pedophilic grooming strategies for recruitment that Daesh allegedly engage in.[5] Repeatedly we are told that the "tactics" used by Faisal are ones that "mirrored recruitment instructions found in an ISIS manual" (Teng and Laffin 2015). Alex's conversion, then, is constructed by the *New York Times* as a slippery one; her faith in Islam, and her comfort in—or perhaps love for—Faisal, is mapped out as a simultaneous and dangerous crush on Daesh. Seduced, Alex is no longer merely a target for conversion, she is also a victim of inappropriate sexual—and, as I shall explore later, racial touch.

Indeed, what is striking about the article and the documentary is the sexual narrativization of Alex's grooming. Along with the obvious salaciousness of its title ("Flirting with the Islamic State"), the documentary itself flirts with the visual styling of sexual victimization confessionals; Alex is constantly backlit, her face is always hidden or positioned just off-screen, and the camera lingers on a number of close-up shots of her typing on a keyboard and chatting late at night with Faisal. The abandoned and lonely landscapes we are presented with bring about a sense of loss and interrupted potential. The narrative itself makes this connection between romantic and religious corruption explicit:

> Alex began leading a double life. […] [H]er truck's radio was no longer tuned to the Christian hits on K-LOVE. Instead, she hummed along with the ISIS anthems blasting out of her turquoise iPhone, and began daydreaming about what life with the militants might be like. […] Alex spent her Valentine's Day curled up on her bed, discussing the theological justification for suicide bombings with an ISIS supporter.

[5] Duncan Lewis, head of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, made this point directly: "They [Australian youth] are being groomed with a technique that is not dissimilar to child molestation" (Schliebs 2015).

> […] She had already begun to imagine her role with the Islamic State as a mother. (Callimachi 2015)

In framing Alex as both a victim of Islamic conversion and as a victim of inappropriate touch, the *New York Times* collapses these into one another: Daesh becomes an organization of sexual predators, and the war against it becomes a militaristic intervention into the abduction and abuse of vulnerable white children by sexually perverse racialized others. This framing follows a longer Orientalist genealogy, and, as I argue in the following section, kindles a discourse of sexual exceptionalism premised on the West's supposed ethical relationship to childhood sexuality.

The West's Revulsion?

The infantilization of Alex is not just a means of positioning her within a sexually exploitative relationship with Faisal in order to reify the value of the white child and the precarious racial and national inheritance it embodies. This discourse is also an attempt to locate a pathologic pedophilia as inherent to Daesh as a means of vehemently disavowing it as somehow constitutive of sexual and political life within the West. Along these lines, the sexual tone to the relationship between Faisal and Alex is additionally indicative of what Puar and Rai diagnose as a discourse which works to pathologize the figure of the "monster-terrorist" through the lens of sexuality. This pathologization, they argue, presents terrorism as "a symptom of the deviant psyche, the psyche gone awry, or the failed psyche" and particularly as a symptom or figuring of a "failed heterosexuality" (Puar and Rai 2002: 122). In so doing, this pathologizing narrative seeks to disavow political turmoil and frustration (often impacted by the involvement of the United States in providing arms to various regimes

and devastating communities and landscapes) as the key motivations for people to engage in suicidal violence.

And yet, what is different about this particular characterization is that the sexuality being "flirted with" in Alex's case is not simply the hyper (or failed) heterosexuality of the Muslim man, nor the Muslim man's "inherent" homophobia; rather, it is the Muslim man's "pedophilic" sexuality. In dialogue with other scholars who have worked to deconstruct and challenge the notion that failed heterosexuality, and even pedophilia, characterize "Muslim sexuality" (Puar and Rai, 2002; Massad, 2002; Manchanda, 2015; Ze'evi, 2006), I want to expand this line of critique by thinking about the specific role that pedophilia plays in the production of Orientalist difference, as this difference legitimates the ongoing War on Terror, and as it denies—through its exceptionalism—any responsibility for sexual abuse within non-Muslim Western culture.

While the history of this discourse is longer, I begin here on the reproduction of this discourse, and its usefulness as justification for global warfare (in this case the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan) with the Human Terrain Team (HTT) AF-6 report "Pashtun Sexuality" (2009). This report, as Nivi Manchanda writes, while "[o]stensibly conducted to help American soldiers fight better and be more culturally sensitive, […] essentially turned out to be an exercise in sensitising Western fighters to the devious ways of the Other" (Manchanda 2015). "Pashtun Sexuality" was thus initially compiled to better "understand" US military and British service members' accounts of "men displaying apparently homosexual tendencies" in the Pashtun communities they encountered while on tour in Afghanistan (HTT AF-6 2009). With input from Western experts on "Middle Eastern sexuality" and culture, the report concludes not that the Pashtun people are homosexual—something it deems impossible—rather, it argues that, due to the "Islamic regulation that women are ritually unclean for participation in prayer while on their monthly cycle [and the] cultural

interpretations [which] have created the passionately if erroneously held belief that women are physically undesirable," that Pashtun men have taken to having sex with young boys (HTT AF-6 2009). In the report, the sexual relationships with, and "grooming" of, young boys, is not just a symptom of a cultural inability to properly desire women, it is a pathologic cultural flaw that produces terrorism in the region:

> [The coveting of young boys] appears to underlie a number of Pashtun social structures, most notably the recruitment of very young "soldiers" by commanders of paramilitary groups. […] *This dynamic played a major role in the functioning of the warlord culture that preceded the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan.* (HTT AF-6 2009, emphasis added)

Here, the grooming of young soldiers and the pedophilic seducing of vulnerable boys are relayed as underlying the same systemic pathology, and as bringing into being an international terrorist organization.

The production of the "truth" to the pedophilic desires of Pashtun communities and the grooming tactics of Daesh has been used as an impetus both for militaristic action and for an imperialist, salvific, and exceptionalist discourse. In an article for the *Independent* by Chris Mondloch, a former analyst for the US Marine Corps, for example, he writes:

> If a future Afghan government can achieve a balance between the Taliban, who strictly enforced anti-paedophilia laws but harshly oppressed women, and the current administration, which has put an end to the hard-line Islamic subjugation of women but has allowed bacha bazi to reach shocking levels, Afghanistan's dismal human rights record may improve. […] Identifying key tribal elders and other local

> powerbrokers *who share the West's revulsion* towards such widespread paedophilia is the first step in achieving lasting progress. (2013, emphasis added)

Within this call for action is a blatant exceptionalist narrative which produces the West's alleged "revulsion" towards pedophilia as its ethical superiority over Afghanistan. This practice of locating pedophilia within Muslim communities and cultural practices, and defining it as the central modality through which terrorism operates and spreads across the Middle East, stands in stark contrast to the disavowal and displacement of pedophilia from its location in Western culture, to which I next turn.

Touching Alex

The dynamic of disavowal and displacement which I am arguing are constitutive of the externalization of childhood sexual abuse obscurely texture the documentary. But they come abruptly to the surface if we attend to a different sense of reading the image. Here, moving from analysis of the narrative and the visual to that of the sensual and the tactile, I want to both present touch as an important way of knowing more about disavowal and displacement, and I want to attend to the particular work that touching does in the documentary.

My turn to touching here is also not merely accidental. One of the central visual motifs of "Flirting with the Islamic State" is indeed of Alex touching various objects. Perhaps because Alex's identity could not be revealed, close-up shots of her hands rather than her face fill the camera's frame: Alex holding, touching, grasping, and caressing various objects form the central visual language through which her story is told. The camera lingers as Alex's fingers aimlessly scroll through twitter on her phone, it pulls out slightly in a shot of Alex folding and stroking a headscarf. Her hands, in tight framing, grasp onto a book, *The Rights and Duties of Women in Islam*, which we are told Faisal gifted to her. In a repeated

scene, Alex hugs a large deep-purple teddy bear, stroking and caressing its ears, belly, and bow-tie. More than anything, however, the scene of Alex typing on her computer repeats itself, as if touching the computer screen is the same as her reaching out to touch Faisal. Because touching is so important to the visualization of Alex's conversion, in this section I think through the question of 'touch' in a more expansive way. I thus turn to three different accounts of 'touching,' from Stoler, Sedgwick, and Barad, as they reveal what is additionally at stake in Alex's touch.

As Ann Laura Stoler argues, the initial proliferation of knowledges about, and surveillance over, the precocious sexuality of children derived not just from an investment in the value of the bourgeoisie and their sexuality (Foucault 1987), but additionally from fears of racial mixing and contamination (Stoler, 1995). For Stoler, attending to the question of "touch" that is central to this negotiation of racial and national inheritance challenges Foucault's emphasis on the figure of the masturbating child. For her, the child touching *itself* only tells part of the story: "Discourses on children's sexuality […] were animated by fears that turned less on children touching their own bodies than on their relationship to those bodies that should not touch them" (1995: 149). The fears about the sexual touch of the racialized other, particularly as that "touch" comes into contact with the child, thus both relied on the notion of the vulnerable child and produced the vulnerable child at the heart of these discourses. These fears which coalesce around Alex's seduction operate through, and as, longer legacies of coloniality and racialization facilitated by the precarious sexuality of the white child. Indeed, part of what gives the white child's sexual innocence such value is the longer genealogical production of childhood sexuality which has already been produced in relation to its vulnerability to the *touch* of the racial other.

As Stoler argues, touching is not merely tactile, it is an encounter that is negotiated through and produced within histories of racialization, othering, difference, and coloniality.

But the tactile, as Sedgwick reminds us, is also an important site of knowledge, and a location of intimacy. Touching, Sedgwick argues, is an interesting, and maybe disrupting, form of relation, and way of knowing. Speaking of touch in her 2003 book *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick writes: "the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity; to touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold" (2003: 14). To touch, that is, is both to touch and *be touched*—a form of encounter which is both external and internal, both tactile and affective. As such, I wonder what it might mean to frame this "touch" as a "flirt"? What does it mean to be touched *by* Alex? What does it mean to take seriously the fact that to flirt requires agency, desire, affection, and a cluster of wishes? Can Alex flirt? And who, really, is she flirting with?

These questions lead to others: What is seductive about Alex? What role, or what fantasy, does Alex fulfill for us such that this narrative of her seduction becomes not just intelligible but compelling? Perhaps another way of asking this question is: why does Alex need to be a *child* in order for this narrative of seduction to be, well, *seductive*? For indeed it is important to recognize that Alex only becomes a child precisely through our desire for her—our desire for her to be a child, to be a victimized child, to be an innocent child, and, yes, for her to be a desired and desiring child.

Our need to have Alex be a child, in other words, is a form of desire for childhood, one which, I am arguing here, can only be expressed through a form of racialized, transnational disavowal. To explain this last point, perhaps a different notion of touch is in need of highlighting. For this, I turn to Karen Barad, who writes:

> A common explanation for the physics of touching is that one thing it does *not* involve is … well, touching. That is, there is no actual contact involved. You may think you are touching [something]… but what you are actually sensing is the

> electromagnetic repulsion between the electrons of the atoms that make up your fingers and those that make up the [object]. … That is the tale physics usually tells about touching. Repulsion at the core of attraction. (2012: 209)

Repulsion at the core of attraction. Ambivalence at the heart of desire. All bound up through the (im)possibilities of Alex's queer childhood. The need to have Alex be a child is thus facilitating some queer maneuvers. In watching Alex be desired by a monstrous man, we can revel in the pleasure of watching, and partaking in, the desiring of Alex; and we can do so through Faisal. We become Faisal even as we disavow that we ever could be. There is a certain disavowed flirtatious pleasure that is being experienced in the contemporary discourses of grooming and radicalization which need further interrogation, and interrogation not just in the "site" of the elsewhere. In fusing the pedophile and the racialized other together as one, a particular form of disavowal is allowed to flourish.

According to James Kincaid (1994, 1998), the erotic culture of the United States has a problematic and disavowed relationship to pedophilia. Kincaid's argument is twofold: on one hand, the contours of the innocent child and the normative markers of the erotic object are mapped onto one another even though children are illegitimate sexual subjects of desire. Enticed by innocence's eroticism, but unable to legally or morally enact this desire, Kincaid argues that one of the problematic ways adults fulfill their (disavowed) sexualizing of the child is through repeating stories of horrid sexual abuse with "such automatic indignation that the indignation comes to seem almost like pleasure" (1998: 7). On the other hand, Kincaid notes, the disavowal of the erotification of childhood innocence leads to a corresponding disavowal of the fathomability of pedophilic desire itself: "The [child molester] has been pried free from medical and psychological explanations and is now subject only to moral ones. […] [W]e've come to agree that pedophiles are best regarded as inexplicable" (1998:

88). What is striking about the contrast between Kincaid's diagnosis of disavowed US eroticism and Mondloch's diagnosis of the "widespread pedophilia" in Afghanistan is of course the uneven distribution of cultural blame for the erotification of children. And yet, while Kincaid is struck by the ways in which American discourse cannot locate pedophilic desire as inherent to US culture (even as this very culture produces it), I argue that Kincaid's analysis is restricted by his bounded framing of the nation. When we incorporate a transnational frame, the question of the pedophile's "inexplicability" becomes one determined less by the "unspeakable" erotification of innocence, and more by the racist distribution of pathological and cultural blame.

Take, for a final contrasting example, the lack of racial and cultural blame surrounding what Joseph Campbell, the director of the FBI's Criminal Investigative Division, called an "epidemic level" of grooming and child sex-trafficking in the United States in 2015 (Panell 2015). The discourses surrounding this report refused to locate blame within whiteness even as 87% of all convictions for possession of child pornography in the United States are of white men (USSC 2012).[6] Given the recent exposures of the child sexual abuse committed by Larry Nasser and Jerry Sandusky, two prominent figures in elite American institutions, a case could be made for hearing an echo of the HTT report's condemning of the recruiting of vulnerable children into structures of power through sexual touch as endemic to American culture writ large. Thinking across these examples, we can thus see that it is precisely as Mondloch disavows any potential for pedophilia within the West that he is able to locate it as a systematic cultural pathology in Afghanistan. I should be clear, however, that my bringing together of Kincaid and Mondloch is not to argue for their mutuality. While I do,

[6] I am remiss to rely on incarceration statistics to provide evidence for cultural or racial deviancy. That said, this over-representation of white men in convictions of child pornography becomes all the more meaningful when contrasted with the wider racist carceral logics of the prison industrial complex wherein black men are incarcerated at six times the rate of white men.

of course, want childhood sexual abuse to end, I do not seek to expand their shared desire to search for pedophilia's centrality to political "problems." Rather, my argument is that the effectiveness of the discourse of the pedophilic touch of the racialized Muslim other needs to be read as a combination of a sexual politics and a politics of displacement. These dynamics unevenly deploy racial blame for pedophilia and child sexual abuse as a means of maintaining the disavowal which structures its subject's superiority.

Conclusion: Homonationalism as Disturbing Attachment?

In this paper, I have argued for an expansion of the terms of sexual politics and "queer liberalism"—to galvanize and call into question Puar's frame—beyond seeing homosexuality as sexual liberalism's main node, and to think more broadly about how the bolstering of US nationalism and its empire building projects gain legitimacy through an Islamophobic construction of sexuality in the Middle East vis-à-vis a notion of exceptional sexual ethics in the West. While for Puar this exceptionalism is produced in regards to "the identities of US queerness" (2005: 122), for the context of this paper, this exceptionalism is taking place in relationship to the West's supposed ethical praxis regarding childhood sexuality. As a broader politics, my expansion of these terms brings into question the implications of the implicit shock that fuels much of the critical reveal of homosexuality's imbrication with queer liberalism—a shock which posits that the "proper" object of a critique of sexual politics must be one, like homosexuality, whose ethicality might be saved (or returned to) if it is wrested from a liberal state project. By centering pedophilia, a structure of desire that is not so easily saved, but is, as I've shown, similarly leveraged within sexual politics more generally, I argue for critiques of sexual politics to not require (or assume) their object's original ethicality or neutrality. And, at the same time, I argue that we not abandon nor

disavow the perhaps more difficult objects whose uneven distribution and uptake also requires interruption.

Interestingly, an analysis of sexual politics that attends to childhood sexuality and pedophilia has been articulated already (Puar and Rai 2002; Puar 2007; Manchanda 2015) but hasn't had as much uptake within what might be understood as the 'buzzwordification' (Davis 2008) of homonationalism. This lack of traction, I argue in the conclusion of this article, might be framed through what Kaji Amin (2017) has called queer's attachment to liberalism. Amin's incisive and challenging text *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* takes on the attachment to Genet within queer theory and argues that the lack of interest in modern pederasty within Queer Studies (a term borrowed from Robyn Wiegman) tells us something about the queer attachment to liberalism. Amin's analysis is not necessarily a demand to incorporate modern pederasty into queer theory, but rather to ask after why this incorporation has been deemed impossible. A central reason, Amin writes, might sound paradoxical:

> Pederasty reveals the ways in which, despite the field's vociferous critiques of liberalism, liberalism's historical imaginaries—which deem pederasty *passé* and apolitical while attaching nonpederastic homosexuality to a more just political future, however narrowly imagined—continue to resonate within Queer Studies. (2017: 36)

For Amin, in other words, Queer Studies abandoned pederasty because it disturbed not just normative standards of sexual ethics, but also because it disturbed homonormative attachments to liberalism which ironically undergird queer theory's ascension into Queer Studies.

Following Amin's lead, I argue that the ascendency and proliferation of a particular version of homonationalist critique—one that maintains LGBT subjects as the subjects and ironic victims of homonationalism—is premised on a similar attachment to liberalism. This critique of the take up of homonationalism is not, to be clear, a critique of Puar. Indeed, Puar has routinely named homonationalism as not simply "gay racism" and as incorporating a range of sexual practices and normativities, including pedophilia (Puar, cited in Mikdashi 2011; Puar 2012). Rather, following Puar's own critique of the misappropriation of homonationalism as revealing a desire to re-center liberal identity formations which she had been critiquing for their very alignment with the structure of power which undergirds homonationalism as a condition of our time—I am arguing that the lack of take up of pedophilia within the popular take up homonationalism is a sign of a sustained attachment to the forms of identity which Puar was, and continues to be, so wary of. Popular mobilizations of homonationalism, in other words, prioritize the LGBT subject in ways that both limit an analysis of sexual exceptionalism and sexual violence, and seek to cling to modes of identity which require intervention.

Critiquing the externalization of childhood sexual abuse and desire as emblematic of contemporary sexual politics helps reinstate an analysis of those subjects, desires, and forms of relation which we find disturbing. This critique is so necessary, because, as I've argued, part of what sustains the pervasive failure to hold privileged individuals accountable for their sexual abuses is an exceptionalist discourse which only locates childhood desire, and child abuse, elsewhere. Here, the queer child—that odd child subject who plays with how and where we locate desire—perhaps forces us to differently navigate the scene of sexual politics and to connect the so-called "unfathomable" to the ongoing transnational projects of death, destruction, and exploitation, which we desire, yet disavow.

References:

Amin, K. (2017) *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Barad, K. (2012) On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am. *Differences* 23(3): 206-223.

Bruhm, S. and Hurley, N. (eds.) (2004) *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Butler, J. (2008) Sexual politics, torture, and secular time. *The British Journal of Sociology* 59(1): 1-23.

Callimachi, R. (2015) ISIS and the Lonely Young American. *The New York Times*, June 27. Accessed online: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/28/world/americas/isis-online-recruiting-american.html

Davis, K. (2008) Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful. *Feminist Theory* 9(1): 67-85.

Foucault, M. (1978) *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction.* Robert Hurley (trans.) New York: Pantheon Books.

Government Accountability Office. (2011) Criminal Alien Statistics: Information on Incarcerations, Arrests, and Costs. [Report] Washington, DC.

Halberstam, J. (2012) *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Human Terrain Team (HTT) AF-6. (2009) *Research Update and Findings: Pashtun Sexuality*. [Report]. Washington, DC.

Kincaid, J. (1994) *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Literature*. London: Routledge.

Kincaid, J. (1998) *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Lesnik-Oberstein, K. and Thompson, S. (2002) What is Queer Theory Doing With the Child? *Parallax* 8(1): 35-46.

Manchanda, N. (2015) Queering the Pashtun: Afghan Sexuality in the Homonationalist Imaginary. *Third World Quarterly.* 36(1): 130-146.

Massad, J. (2002) Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World. *Public Culture* 14:2.

Mikdashi, M. (2011) Gay Rights as Human Rights: Pinkwashing Homonationalism. *Jdaliyya.* Accessed Online: http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/24855/Gay-Rights-as-Human-Rights-Pinkwashing-Homonationalism

Mondloch, C. (2013) Bacha Bazi: An Afghan Tragedy. *Foreign Policy*, October 28. Accessed Online: http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/an-afghan-tragedy-the-pashtun-practice-of-having-sex-with-young-boys-8911529.html.

Moon, M. (1991) *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Muñoz, J. (2009) *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

Neumann, P. (2012) Countering Online Radicalization in America. [Report] Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center.

Pannell, I. (2015) "Epidemic" of US Children Sold for Sex. *BBC News*, July 29. Accessed Online: http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-33713332

Puar, J. (2005) Queer Times, Queer Assemblages. *Social Text* 84-85, 23:3-4

Puar, J. (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Puar, J. (2012) The Golden Handcuffs of Gay Rights: How Pinkwashing Distorts both LGBTIQ and Anti-Occupation Activism. *The Feminist Wire*, January 30. Accessed Online: http://www.thefeministwire.com/2012/01/the-golden-handcuffs-of-gay-rights-how-pinkwashing-distorts-both-lgbtiq-and-anti-occupation-activism/

Puar, J. and Rai, A. (2002) Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots. *Social Text.* 72 vol. 20 no. 3.

Schleibs, M. (2015) We must keep pace with ISIS, says ASIO chief Duncan Lewis. *Weekend Australian*, September 19. Accessed Online: https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/defence/we-must-keep-pace-with-isis-says-asio-chief-duncan-lewis/news-story/471b8ff3a9fe4b80411ef1f256341bf6

Sedgwick, E. K. (1991) How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay. *Social Text* 29: 18-27.

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003) T*ouching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stockton, K. B. (2009) *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stockton, K. B. (2016) The Queer Child Now and its Paradoxical Global Effects. *GLQ* 22(4): 505-539.

Stockton, K. B., Sheldon, R. and Gill-Peterson, J. (eds.) (2016) *The Child Now.* [Special Issue] *GLQ* 22(4).

Stoler, A. L. (1995) *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Duke University Press: Durham.

Teng, P. S., and Laffin, B. (2015) *Flirting with the Islamic State.* Online Video: http://www.nytimes.com/video/world/100000003749550/flirting-with-the-islamic-state.html

Trump, D. (2016) Transcript: Donald Trump's Taped Comments About Women. *The New York Times,* October 8. Accessed Online: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html?module=inline

United States Sentencing Commission (2012) Report to the Congress: Federal Child Pornography Offenses. Washington, DC.

White House (2018) Our Current Immigration System Jeopardizes American Security. [Fact Sheet] January, 16.Washington, DC. Available Online: https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/current-immigration-system-jeopardizes-american-security/

Whitehead, T. (2014) Girl, 15, stopped from joining Isil by anti-terror police on plane at Heathrow. *The Telegraph*, December 17. Accessed Online: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11299128/Girl-15-stopped-from-joining-Isil-by-anti-terror-police-on-plane-at-Heathrow.html

Ze'evi, D. (2006) *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500-1900.* Berkeley: University of California Press