FINAL VERSION

Queer/Euro Visions

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Introduction

In this chapter, I use the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) as a site for illuminating how "Europe" and "queer" inform each other in a range of different ways. My central interest is in how both underscore a tension between the assertion and deconstruction of identity. As well, I explore how the intersection of Europe and queer illustrates the relationship between universality and difference, and highlights how Eurovision is a space that can be politicized. More generally, I aim to demonstrate how Eurovision raises issues at the heart of European integration today.

Why do I focus on Eurovision? It has long been argued that queers within and beyond Europe have engaged in the cultural appropriation of the ESC as a tool for the affirmation of identity. Ivan Raykoff understands this through the use of camp;[1] Paul Allatson argues that the ESC deploys kitsch;[2] and Robert Deam Tobin writes of a queer aesthetic in the ESC. Eurovision has also been explained by Dafna Lemish as a site for transnational queer community formation and democratic participation. Indeed, one might focus upon Eurovision as an arena of citizenship, providing a microcosm and metaphor for a wider progressive sexual politics in the European Union today.[3] That is, in the EU, human rights standards have led to law reform and Eurovision, by analogy, might be read as the popular cultural vehicle for enabling equal access to the public sphere. In the overtly political domain, for example, EU anti-discrimination law on the basis of "sexual orientation" is frequently hailed as a great political achievement, as a range of "European institutions have

helped to define the rights of LGBT people as human rights" (Kollman 38; see also Binnie 65). Same-sex sexuality, over the last number of years, has moved from being seen as a matter for national determination based on cultural particularity, towards a benchmark of respect for universal equality norms that provide a litmus test of European civilization (Stychin, Same-Sex).[4] However, I want to argue in this chapter that such a straightforward, linear, emancipatory tale of legal and social progress should be eschewed – both with respect to law *and* Eurovision -- in favor of more complex and contradictory readings.

Let me begin with a recent example. A lesbian and gay rights march timed to coincide with the ESC in Moscow in 2009 was broken up by police after facing a counter-demonstration by nationalist and religious groups. The protest of around thirty campaigners called for equal rights and condemned the treatment of lesbians and gay men in Russia. At least twenty were arrested by police. The mayor of Moscow had previously described gay pride marches as "satanic" and anti-gay groups had threatened violence against the protesters if the police did not intervene (BBC). These events provide a sobering reminder of the gulf between the liberal rights rhetoric of international and European human rights law--in which " 'LGBT human rights' has become an easy catchword at the EU" (Swiebel 20) -- and the reality on the ground in many parts of Europe (*both* within and beyond the EU) today. Although the desire for EU membership has forced some states to reform anti-gay laws in order to meet accession criteria, progress has been mixed, and the gulf between legislation and daily life across Europe is frequently vast (Stychin, *Governing Sexuality* 115-38). In Moscow, despite the way in which hosting the ESC was explicitly deployed so as to prove that "the nation has the capability to join in the symbolic commodity production

of late, post-industrial modernity" (Bolin 203), the glare of publicity did not inhibit the state from deploying brute repression.

While the Moscow protest demonstrates the ongoing close connections between queer sexualities and the ESC, it also simultaneously illuminates the tensions around the universalizing claims of queer rights, the globalization of human rights, and the prevalence of a discourse of European "civilization" on the one hand; and the continuing importance of nationalism, cultural particularity, and the role of the authoritarian state, on the other. During the protest, a "western" identity category is both embraced in the desire for social progress, and also policed in the name of the nation state. Rather than eschewing identity as queers in the west sometimes advocate, in Russia, identity comes to be deployed, whether strategically or otherwise. Finally, of most immediate relevance for my purposes, Eurovision provides the backdrop against which this identity is articulated and regulated.

Queers and Nations

> Eurovision ... offers a model of European citizenship that is particularly amenable to needs that are present in queer populations and communities (Tobin 25).

What caused the love affair between queers and Eurovision? The answer must be found somewhere in the long and spectacular history of the Contest. The ESC began in 1956 as a project of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) (an association of public broadcasters) and participation has always been open to any member country of the EBU. The composition of the EBU is broad. It is not an EU agency; rather, founded in 1950, it "is the world's largest professional association of national public-service broadcasters" (Raykoff 2). Membership includes, for example, a number of

North African and Middle Eastern countries. Thus, the borders of the competition have always been far broader than those of the European Union or its predecessors, the EEC and EC, whose political and cultural borders have themselves been subject to widening throughout history.

Based loosely on the San Remo Song Festival, the ESC was explicitly designed as a means of fostering European culture through the increasingly important medium of television, and it has been described as "perhaps the largest and best-organized institution promoting a cultural kind of pan-European identity" (Tobin 28). Although always intended as a "popular" spectacle, early contests today seem strangely removed from contemporaneous cultural developments, and oddly frozen in time. Color television, however, added vibrancy and "over-the-top" appeal, underscoring the importance of costume, sets, and spectacle, which has proven so enticing for a mass audience of queers. If measured solely in terms of audience numbers and engagement of the viewing public, the ESC has proven a great success, providing one Saturday evening every year shared across national borders within and well beyond the European Union.[5] The fact that participation in the ESC has extended so widely – today encompassing Israel, Turkey and Russia – reinforces the idea that European boundaries are far from fixed or "natural," possessing instead an indeterminate and fluctuating borderland. In addition, the ESC has often foreshadowed developments in political union: "Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and Lithuania joined the ESC a decade before they were allowed to join the EU, predicting Europe's gradual expansion towards the East" (Raykoff 7). The same, of course, could be said for the United Kingdom, which was one of the original participants of the ESC, long before it achieved membership of the EEC. At the same time, for some viewers, this anti-essential approach to European membership is

controversial, "troubling" the certainties of a European order, as the margins freely mix with--and often triumph over--the center (Björnberg 17). Eurovision thus provides a graphic example of how "concepts such as 'Europe' and 'culture' are ... discursively shaped categories in a permanent flux where boundaries are constantly contested and negotiated" (af Malmborg and Stråth 5).

The explanations for the queer cultural appropriation of the ESC are valuable, and no doubt they all provide partial answers. But the relationship between sexuality and nationhood, as it is presented through the ESC, undoubtedly is a complex tale, and "hostility within Europe to the idea of a unified Europe often surfaces in homophobic ways" (Tobin 33). In 2002, for example, the Slovenian entry (thanks to expert jury voting) was a drag act portraying airline flight attendants.[6] While a queer reading of this performance might focus upon the postmodern play of the signifiers of sexuality, nationhood and globalization, the reaction in Slovenia was far less amused, triggering widespread protests. Moreover, those protests were themselves "cited as evidence that Slovenia was not a suitable candidate for entry into the EU, which it hoped to join in 2004" (O'Connor 170). The reaction underscores how the EU's ideological underpinnings remain closely tied to a civilizing discourse, which has been most apparent in the context of accession states and the demands of EU institutions for national legal recognition of lesbian and gay rights (Stychin, *Governing Sexuality* 127-37). As Jan Zielonka observes, "for many of the current member states ... enlargement looked more like a missionary crusade, in which applicant countries were sometimes treated as an equivalent of medieval barbarians that needed to be taught the superior Western ways."[7]

By contrast, the famous victory of Israeli transsexual Dana International in the 1998 ESC was widely (but certainly not universally) interpreted in Israel in positive

terms as a triumph of liberalism. Ivan Raykoff argues that "Dana International's victory represented geographically peripheral Israel as 'international' too, and served to rally liberal West European values towards the image of a secular and progressive nation" (11). It also served as an important tool for community formation by gay men in Israel who, it has been argued, felt part of a wider transnational queer community as a result (Lemish). At the time, the performance was described as blending "popular, representative Israeli music with resistance to ordinary nationalist representation" (Ben-Zvi 28). Tragically, ten years later, the discourse of civilization would be frequently marshalled by Europeans against Israel, in response to its government's masculinist, military incursions into occupied Palestinian lands. In this moment, Israel becomes constructed (rightly or wrongly) neither as European (thereby erasing Europe's own history as a group of imperial, invading powers) nor as civilized.

Thus, my argument foregrounds a contested and ambiguous relationship between the ESC and queer culture. My view is that it is unwise to adopt a single model of sexuality and identity in an analysis of the ESC, particularly given the likelihood that such a frame will reflect a highly culturally specific construction of sexual identity. As many have argued, the signifiers of the ESC are "highly unstable and not very well culturally anchored" (Björnberg 15), giving rise to a range of readings and interpretations. For example, camp today may be as closely aligned to "folk epistemologies" as it is to queer culture (Hoad 58), giving rise to its appropriation by an imagined and invented "traditional" heterosexual village life of some indeterminate past, *as well as* by queer transnationals simultaneously. This undoubtedly opens creative space for the viewing public. It also underscores that there

are innumerable ways in which the publics may read Eurovision, depending not only upon sexuality, but gender, nationality and taste as well.

Furthermore, the relationship of queer sexualities to the nation state is historically complex and contested. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the ESC, which is dependent upon the presentation of the nation state, should bring this relationship into such sharp relief. Nationalism has frequently deployed the hetero/homo binary, as well as constructions of gender and race, in its service. As I have argued in earlier work, homosexuality has often been used as the nation's other – an alien within -- providing a ready means to shore up its self-constitution (Stychin, *A Nation by Rights*). We can understand the reaction in some quarters of Slovenia (and there are numerous other examples upon which I could draw) as archetypical of a traditional (but ongoing) relationship between sexuality and nationalism, in which queer sexuality is constructed as outside the bounds of nationhood and appropriate citizenship. By contrast, the acceptance of queer sexualities in some national cultures today can itself be a sign of national identity, in which liberal, western values become constitutive in how a "people" imagines itself. For example, Shauna Wilton has interrogated the way in which gender and sexuality in the Netherlands function "progressively" albeit often problematically, in the service of the liberal nation state through the production of state materials to teach new immigrants "Dutch values" (451).

Finally, music has an historical and ongoing relationship to the construction of national identities, as well as to queer sexualities. The nation state has long been articulated through music, as it "reinforces ... imaginary cultural boundaries" (Saada-Ophir 208). The ESC is a continuation of that tradition, giving rise to frequent national debates about the "appropriateness" of songs and performers as

representative of the national character and identity. It provides a graphic example of the use of music in the service of nationalism as well as transnationalism, in which European countries debate the merits of songs in terms of the degree to which they provide "authentic" representations of national cultures. In the process, nation states implicitly recognize that "the attainment of a sense of historical cultural roots is sought by means of an active construction of the past" (Björnberg 23).

The Queer Politics of Eurovision

> To move beyond considerations of music as art and foreground its political uses is to admit another level of experience--a sphere where musical texts are as malleable as society itself (Clark 803).

My argument in this chapter is that a focus on popular culture, in the form of Eurovision, can provide a means, not only of observing the interest of queers in the Contest, but more fundamentally, to underscore how the ESC functions as a site of the political. Here I follow Jodi Dean's contention that we should understand the political in terms of its pluralization, searching out fields of popular culture that come to be articulated in such a way as to constitute a political realm. This is an approach that does not eschew the importance of the state, but it also recognizes a plurality of connecting sites of politics that "become linked together into a particular power formation" (763). I argue that Eurovision provides one such critical site of politics, demonstrating how "modern democracies are very much shaped by forces ... that manifest themselves in a plurality of political and discursive spheres" (Kaplan 71). Of course, this recognition of the political importance of the cultural will come as no surprise to students of the European Union. Officials of the EU increasingly emphasize, largely through "top down" mechanisms, the role of culture in the political

construction of a European identity, which is now explicitly tied to the promotion of Union citizenship (Crauford Smith; Barber 255-56).

There are multiple ways in which the ESC is a site of the political (many of which are frequently discussed with derision by commentators and fans).[8] Throughout its history, the Contest has given rise to claims that Eurovision is thoroughly politicized (Raykoff 3). Indeed, the impetus for its creation was political, in that it was an attempt to inculcate feelings of "Europeanness" (Tobin 27). Furthermore, the ESC has always led to questionable artistic judgments allegedly based on national and regional allegiances and diasporic identities, and sometimes allegations of overtly political misuses of voting have been made. Perhaps the most blatant example was the 1968 ESC, in which it has been alleged recently that General Franco sought to influence neighbouring countries to vote for Spain (Wigg). Overtly political lyrics have sometimes featured in the Contest, and ESC officials (and national governments) have selectively censored them for being too political (and therefore not suitable as entertainment) (Raykoff 5). However, my interest in this chapter is a more specific theoretical connection of the political and the cultural, and that is through the signifiers "Europe" and "queer." In fact, I want to argue that, through the ESC, we can illuminate the complexities of a European identity, to the extent that it actually exists, and that this can be informed by the insights of queer theory.

The idea of a European transnational identity has been widely explored. Some argue that a strong version of European identity is essential for the future of the Union (von Bogdandy 295). Others claim that the very idea of identity – especially to the extent that it replicates the undesirable features of national identity – should be rejected in favor of alternative imaginings that are not dependent upon unity, fixity, the centrality of the inside-out binary, the exclusion of the other, or the imagining of a

shared history and essence (Lister and Pia). As an empirical observation, it has been noted that "the enlarged EU is likely to have soft borders in flux rather than hard and fixed external borders. ... Pan-European identity will be blurred and fragile" (Zielonka 1). Queer theorists, of course, are all too familiar with the politics of identity, and the rejection of the stability, constraints, and normalizing force of identity politics (Halperin; Warner). At the same time, many would argue that queer itself has become a marker of "a commodity-identity," with its own forms of inclusion, exclusion and normalization (Pratt 188). Nevertheless, I believe that queer can illuminate some of the possibilities of Europe to the extent that Europe may itself potentially be a very queer phenomenon.

By this claim, I mean to suggest that Europe has a complex relationship to identity, proving to be both, in some moments, stable and bounded, and in others, a shape shifting, indeterminate, ill-defined project. Europe, like queer, may be "a site for the continuing construction and renewal of continually changing identities" (Halperin 122). For example, Europe has its own bank notes, but they contain indeterminate pictorial representations which appear to signify nothing: "there is nothing but emptiness: bridges with empty arches, empty doorways, and empty windows" (Tode 307). The motto of the European Union, unity in diversity, underscores the idea of multiplicity, shifting borders, both openness and closure, both the local and the global and, most optimistically, "an escape from the dilemma of universalism and particularism" (Delanty and Rumford 63). More harshly, it has been described as "a saccharin concept" (Borneman and Fowler 495) and, of particular relevance to Eurovision, as representing "an uninterested acceptance of oddities in others that has a patronizing and discriminatory tone to it" (Taras 75). In fact, the relationship of the European Union to "Europe" is itself highly indeterminate. Where

are the borders of Europe? Is this identity ever finally fixed? And, if so, on what basis? While the European Union has long been capable of fixing its others – the phrase "Fortress Europe" is certainly one filled with material meaning for many--this is a fortress capable of continually changing its contours through EU expansion. Moreover, processes of Europeanization increasingly focus on convergence and discipline beyond EU borders, underscoring, in a parallel move to queer politics, that "the relation between inside/outside is therefore changing rapidly."[9]

My contention is that Eurovision exemplifies this indeterminacy, complexity and fluidity. The fact that participation in the ESC has extended so widely reinforces the idea that a European song contest need not be coterminous with any particular historically imagined construction of Europe. Singers do not have to be citizens or residents of the countries they represent. This sometimes means that non-Europeans participate (most famously seen in the victory of Canadian Céline Dion for Switzerland in ESC 1988). It also can underscore the complexities of national identification, as we find performers who are members of minority communities in the north singing for their "homelands" in the south. Voters need not be citizens of the countries from which they telephone in their votes. "Ethnic" music, while it features prominently, is mixed freely with global influences "combining musical expressions of 'rootless' modernity with a revised conception of 'roots music'" (Björnberg 23),which may be sung in an array of languages (including those invented for the occasion). The viewers' identification with this array of free floating signifiers would seem emblematic of a conception of belonging that is best characterized by complexity and pluralism. In that respect, it is a very queer vision of Europe, in which "hybridity is celebrated and aestheticized rather than viewed as the enemy of a pure, essential identity" (Solomon 145).

But such claims of Euro-queerness, while intuitively appealing, also can overstate (and romanticize) the queer potential of Eurovision. The forces of nationalism retain a good deal of discursive and material power in twenty-first century Europe, and this is also apparent in the ESC. For example, prior to the 2007 ESC, the lead singer of the winning Serbian entry, Marija Serifovic, was subject to virulent attack in the Serbian press, which claimed that she was an inappropriate representative of the Serbian nation, due to her Roma ethnicity, her alleged lesbianism, and her claimed "ugliness." In fact, her candidacy was linked to conspiracy theories involving the west and Kosovo, which fed on xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and anti-Roma sentiment (Anastasijevic). In these moments, the nation asserts itself, and does so in heterosexist, racist and gendered terms.

But Eurovision also highlights a particular paradox of queer theory and politics. While queer may challenge the logic of identity, by destabilizing the coherence of a minority group position, the focus on the transgression of normalcy through performance can undermine the political and strategic significance of identity. That is, if queer can be appropriated simply through an act, rather than through the articulation of a coherent group identity, to what extent are we at risk of the depoliticization of sexuality in the process of "queering"? What are the political implications and costs of such a move? Does queer become "a highly universalizing concept" in which "implicitly everyone is actually or potentially queer" (Marshall 91)? In which case, has it been evacuated of all political significance? What is lost if anti-normalization moves are separated from a lesbian and gay identity politics?[10]

Once again, the ESC – like queer – straddles a boundary; this time between the universal and the particular. With respect to sexuality, the tension between the logic of minority group status and the universality of sexual dissidence, is clear. On

the one hand, the ESC has long had a following amongst a lesbian and gay viewing public, and Dafna Lemish has pointed to how the ESC has been an important tool for mobilization, identity formation, and even activism through televoting. Indeed, the Moscow demonstration provides a graphic example both of the use of Eurovision as a vehicle for collective protest, as well as its resistance through the power of the state. In this moment, Eurovision becomes "a broader kind of citizenship" which is open to sexual minorities, providing opportunities for community formation (locally, nationally and transnationally) and democratic participation by the sexually disenfranchised.[11] While I recognize the intuitive appeal of this minoritizing logic, it simultaneously runs into the danger of over-reliance upon a culturally specific experience of sexual identity. The emphasis on camp, for example, may mask the extent to which this analytical tool reflects a culturally narrow understanding of the relationship of sexuality and identity, which is far from universal. It can also overstate and exaggerate the role and importance of popular culture in political struggle (Robson and Kessler).

On the other hand, there is a strongly universalizing current that runs through the ESC, in which the transgression of sexual normalcy and the subversion of the categories of identity, are also apparent. In this moment, the Contest has a strongly queer inflection, but like the anti-identity logic of queer politics and theory, it is also a potentially universalizing force, in that *everyone* can be queer for an evening. Numerous examples could be cited to demonstrate this point. To take but one, the 2007 ESC runner up was Ukrainian cross dressing star Verka Serduchka, "a flamboyant, if grotesque, caricature of Ukrainian village folk" (Savage). The success of Serduchka could be read as a victory for a gay/queer sexual identity, from a national context which is emerging as more pluralistic and open to "transnational

values" and "Europeanness" than some more ethnically nationalist parts of the region (Taras 112). However, this interpretation of the politics of the performance would be problematic. The character of Verka Serduchka was invented by a popular mainstream performer and, while some Ukrainians opposed the Eurovision entry on the basis that it was vulgar, the song *Lasha Tumbai* had a strongly universal appeal. Although many of the lyrics (particularly the title) appear to be wholly invented and without meaning in any language (thereby avoiding any cultural particularity), the song also included words from at least five different languages. Its appeal can be read as a combination of the strangely exotic particularity of this highly specific village parody, and the universalism of the carnivalesque, in which influences from a range of musical styles are clearly apparent including, for example, Weimar Germany.[12] Rather than drawing on a narrow base, this performance involved cultural appropriations from a wide range of sources.

Moreover, the politics of the performance was facilitated by its aesthetic, in that political messages could be conveyed because of the apparently depoliticized queer style. The superficial meaninglessness of the song's title may well have concealed (but also revealed) a further concrete meaning, as the song was widely understood as *really* conveying the message *Russia, Goodbye*, underscoring the contentious regional politics of the period (Ershova). Interestingly, Eurovision officials have often sought to maintain a closed border between politics and culture. Songs have been disqualified on the basis that they were too "political," including the 2009 Georgian entry whose lyric "We Don't Wanna Put In," was interpreted by ESC officials as "We Don't Wanna Putin," and rendered ineligible for performance (UNIAN). Thus, I would argue that the queer politics of Verka Serduchka, rather than giving rise to a depoliticization of the space of Eurovision, actually facilitated a

covertly political message that could be read by a knowing audience. It facilitated the politicization of a transnational European sphere. Serduchka cleverly moved between parody and commentary on regional politics.

But the Ukrainian entry was not unique in this ability to move between the local, the regional, and the global. The history of the ESC is replete with examples of the oscillation between universalizing and particularizing currents, as "specific markers of national style might be woven into a song that is otherwise global" (Bohlman 7). For example, the freedom to sing in any language, as opposed to the requirement of singing in an official language of the entry country, has altered several times, most recently in 1999, when the restriction was again lifted (O'Connor 157). In practice, the rule now allows countries to choose the universal of the English language which, many believe, greatly enhances the chances of success (although this also may be altering given the expansion of the ESC, in which that hegemony may be undermined). Through the years, though, participating countries have managed on a number of (sometimes famous) occasions to circumvent the particularizing force of language restrictions in order to appeal to a universal audience, such as through nonsensical, invented languages, or familiar refrains. The now infamous Spanish winning entry of 1968 (*La, la, la*) is an oft-cited example by which the rule was bypassed through the (constant) repetition of "la" in "the most repetitious song ever heard in the Contest" (O'Connor 34).

Simultaneously, however, many successful songs of the ESC have been strongly influenced by the forces of cultural "difference" through the use, for example, of "indigenous" or "ethnic" musical styles. Of course, the characterization of music as authentically indigenous is itself a tool of nationalist discourse through "an active construction of the past rather than historical accuracy" (Björnberg 23).

Nevertheless, it is a highly successful phenomenon that has become widespread in recent years. More accurately, it can be argued that Eurovision voters have rewarded some songs which combine *both* particularizing and universalizing currents, blending what a "universal" audience *will read as* indigenous and authentic *with* global pop music. Like queer, the ESC plays with both universalizing and particularizing moments, straddling the boundary between identity and difference. I would argue that this mirrors the way in which legal protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation struggles between the forces of universalism (human rights) and (cultural, national) specificity.

This phenomenon provides a microcosm of wider developments in Europe today. A widely cited example of the successful mixing of the universal and the particular can be found in Turkey's winning song, *Everyway that I can*, by Sertab from 2003. So-called "ethnic stylings" are combined with English lyrics and popular music, which, as Thomas Solomon argues, uses "the exotic Turkish elements" such as belly dancing "within an overall hybrid style, and seem to be intended not so much for consumption in Turkey, but for distribution, promotion and consumption outside Turkey" (137). Matthew Gumpert has described this strategy as "Auto-Orientalist" in that ethnicity is made consumable, and cultural difference becomes "just another performance designed for the West" (155). The symbolic significance of Turkey's victory cannot be underestimated, and it was "widely seen in Turkey as an allegory of its aspirations to join the European Union and its frustratingly slow movement toward that goal" (Soloman 136). As the lyrics urge:

> Tell me whatcha see in other girls all around
> Come on closer and tell me whatcha don't find here

Come on now now

I wanna give you everything you've been missin' out

Just let go and let me love you.

The song may provide a useful lesson for those working towards EU membership in Turkey and elsewhere. "Success" in the political realm may depend upon the domestication of the "exotic," which becomes assimilable into the dominant so-called "universal" values of the EU. In this way, both Eurovision and the struggle for EU membership become performative forms of identity, in which the other must reiterate that difference and particularity, if not transcended, can at least be contained, domesticated and normalized in such a way that it is non-threatening and non-transgressive. The political challenge of EU expansion is answered by making difference "slightly and safely exotic" for its audience (Gumpert 151). In this moment, the strategy is to normalize the queer, rather than to queer the normal.

3. Grounding All Flights: The Materiality of the Political

Eurovision also highlights a deeper tension within the logic of Europe. Peter Fitzpatrick has persuasively demonstrated that Europe is continually constructed such that it can be made to appear to be the universal against which various others fail to live up to its liberal ideals (125). At the same time, Europe can be a particular, against which others can be excluded as not essentially belonging. The slogan unity in diversity perfectly encapsulates this tension, as "the European dimension is conceived of as a mediating instance between the global scale and local allegiances" (Sassatelli 439). But this renders the meaning of "Europe" permanently deferred and yet forever asserted; as an identity and as difference, for "heterogeneity is a conceptual problem

for any notion of identity" (Mayer and Palmowski 582). The logic of identity is turned to as a means of articulating unity in an endless search for the discovery of that point of commonality. The quest however is forever undone by the logic of difference, of multiplicity, and of the lack of fixity of the frontier. This leads to the celebration of diversity in which Europe can be "attached to everything in need of valorization" (Sassatelli 445). As Eurovision so vividly demonstrates, the assertion of identity can always be undermined, which the ESC manages to do so successfully, I would argue, because of its lack of claim to being either high culture or explicitly political. Like queer, its power lies in its ability to transgress and to trouble, including the boundary between the political and the cultural.

But the tension between transgression and assimilation remains central to identity. Queer activists and theorists have long emphasized the transgressive dimension of sexuality; eschewing the rights-based (and, some might argue, assimilationist) strategies of the lesbian and gay movement in favor of a politics of "direct address," activism, performance, and the subversion of identity (Bower). However, it strikes me that the divisive debates around sexual politics too often miss the important point that the assertion of identity, *as well as* its transgression, may *both* be important "moments" in a progressive political strategy focused on greater inclusion, the pluralization of sexualities, and the destabilization of the heterosexual norm (Stychin, Being Gay).

We can see that tension all too clearly in sexual politics in Europe today. Rights discourse has proven increasingly powerful within the EU and beyond, including as a condition of membership for accession countries. In this moment, the assertion and recognition of a coherent sexual identity has been important for the advancement of progressive sexuality politics. The Moscow demonstration highlights

the power of identity as a fulcrum around which to mobilize and resist the repressive nationalist state. Yet, while identity may provide an important basis for resisting violence, we also need to recognize the violence of identity's assertion, which necessarily erects borders, erases difference, and too often normalizes and disciplines us into citizenship. The focus on the recognition of same-sex relationships – an increasingly important development within the EU – provides an example of this phenomenon, in which the model of the care-giving monogamous couple may come to dominate sexuality politics. At the same time, diversity and difference across time and place can come to be erased through the universalizing power of human rights discourse, too often reinforcing the hegemony of a culturally specific identity position. Queering those newly emerging boundaries of normalcy becomes an important corrective to the discipline of rights politics. Similarly, Eurovision is caught in this conundrum of transgression and normalization. While its history may be replete with examples of the transgression of the "norms" of what officials may consider to be appropriate European entertainment (some of which has proven appealing to the voting general public), there are also strong normalizing currents by which the ESC may be becoming more professionalized, appropriate, wholesome, dignified, slick and, as a consequence, increasingly un-queer.

In sum, my argument is that the ESC replicates queer in the way in which it oscillates between a stable, collective sexual identity and a site for the transgression and destabilization of identity. But I also claim that Europe is a space in which we find this same tension. At times, Europe can queer the nation state, while at others, Europe replicates the nation state by reproducing its stable borders and the inside/out dichotomy. Similarly, the language of human rights tends to normalize sexual and

other identities within Europe, as rights discourse becomes increasingly entrenched and a sign of European civilization.

Eurovision thus provides a laboratory in which we can observe the extent to which a coherent European identity may be emerging and how it can be queered. The ESC does challenge the idea of an essential Europe in terms of nations and peoples; and it underscores the extent to which identity is a social construction always open to reimagining. The borders of the ESC demonstrate the fuzziness of the frontier, in which belonging is open ended and negotiable. Yet, I urge caution in adopting a position of unqualified celebration of the transgressive and transformative potential of Eurovision. It is all too easy to view the Contest as promoting a formal equality between peoples in which membership is open to all and the inside/out binary is permanently troubled. Like queer politics, such a position, with its focus on culture and performance, can obscure real imbalances of power, inequalities, and exclusions that remain at the heart of Europe today. As Neville Hoad has suggested in the context of the Miss World Pageant, through these television events "the claim of equality of opportunity and meritocracy is displaced from the economic arena and instead insisted upon culturally" (64). An emphasis on popular culture can obscure issues of race, religion, ethnicity, national belonging and economic distribution, which must remain central to a progressive European project.[13] There is, thus, a fundamental tension – which is produced as much by queer as it is by Europe – between the depoliticization of identity and the foregrounding of a politics of representation *and* redistribution *in addition to* recognition (Fraser 17-18).

This point can be demonstrated using the example of the United Kingdom's entry in the 2007 ESC, *Flying the Flag (For You)*, performed by re-formed pop group Scooch. This self-consciously camp music tune was accompanied by a vivid

performance by the group, dressed as an airplane crew in flight (which draws upon the transnational dimension of European citizenship mobility). The song and its performance could be read as providing a self-conscious and self-aware portrayal of European citizenship, which was even accompanied by flags of European nation states and the European Union, reproduced on the drinks trolleys as props. The performance had an overwhelmingly tongue-in-cheek quality, replete with queer sexual innuendo. From the perspective of camp, *Flying the Flag* seems the ideal vehicle, which, one might have thought, would have tapped into a transnational queer affinity. However, the UK entry had a dismal showing on the night, as audiences seemed not to get the joke; or alternatively, they got the joke but did not find it amusing.

I would suggest that the song's message conveys quite an ambivalent politics. For those who do not yet possess transnational citizenship status, mobility rights are no laughing matter. The ESC, by contrast, provides a public space in which to sing in support of genuinely held (and certainly not ironic) aspirations to European citizenship (Bolin). It is significant that the lyrics of the entry uniformly describe the European travel experience in one direction only. The message of *Flying the Flag* appears to be that "we" in the west can sample the exotic other on cheap flights, safe in the knowledge that we can return to our "normal" selves unscathed and unmarked:

> London to Berlin
>
> All the way from Paris to Tallinn
>
> Helsinki on to Prague …
>
> We're flying the flag all over the world –
>
> Yes we're flying – take you all around the world.

Flying the flag for you.

There is certainly no reference made to economic migration, nor to inequalities between regions. Rather, the lyrics perhaps unintentionally reveal--to paraphrase Raykoff--who gets to go "camping" it up in this new Europe. This exemplifies the depoliticization of a queer consumer based citizenship, in which gross material inequalities are erased. It mirrors an oft-repeated criticism of queer culture that, in its focus on playful performativity, it can lose sight of real inequalities of distribution, and "can be read as denying the experiences and problems of those for whom sexual identity is central to their lives" (Rahman 117).

We should also not obscure the cultural specificity of a queer aesthetic, which too often masquerades as a universal currency. To return to the 2007 winning ESC entry performed by Serbian singer Marija Serifovic, I would tentatively hypothesize that, for the western queer subject, this performance may have been read (by some at least) as a butch and her group of femme backing singers. A romantic ballad is sung in a language that seems very obscure, but what may be familiar is the apparent gender transgression of Serifovic, who sings to her group of adoring, fem-styled singers. On this reading, her victory could be understood as the triumph of a playful lesbian camp, in which heterosexual discourses of romantic love are parodied, in a performance resembling both "liturgical dancing" and "a slow-motion lesbian porn film" (Savage). By contrast, feminist cultural commentator Germaine Greer described the victory in more earnest (and romanticized)--yet nevertheless sexually and ethnically transgressive--terms: "Serifovic's big, supple voice, apparently effortlessly produced from her deep chest, is imbued with a special kind of feeling which comes from one of the wellsprings of the European song tradition. Marija Serifovic is not

just an out lesbian, she is Romany. If ever a voice deserved to reign over Eurovision it is the voice of the Gypsy, who is made to live everywhere in Europe as if it was nowhere." Greer highlights the complexities of national identity, for Serifovic is both representative of a nation state, yet is ethnically constructed as stateless. She both draws on tradition, but (according to Greer) queers the nation simultaneously.

However, as became clear upon her victory, Marija saw her performance very differently, pointedly remarking that "I like to hear the music not watch it" and "I hope that next year in Belgrade it will be a music contest again" (Savage). She approached the contest in great seriousness, emphasizing that this was a victory for artistic merit over spectacle. Rather than providing a queer challenge to the masculinist boundaries of nationhood, I would speculate that Serifovic's performance was read very "un-queerly" by some within Serbia, where this may have been interpreted as a victory primarily *for* nation, and a marker of Serbia's international rejuvenation, rather than a sign of sexual liberalism, pluralism or irony.[14] Rather, the irony perhaps is to be found in the fact that Serifovic was appointed by the EU as an intercultural ambassador for the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue (European Commission) while, at the same time, singing at an election rally of the Serbian Radical Party (the platform of which is based on the Greater Serbia ideal) (Reuters). Yet, at the same time, Serifovic's victory also was claimed by the beleaguered lesbian and gay community in Serbia, "who celebrated the lesbian chic-tinged performance as a rare sight in the conservative Christian Orthodox country," in which the universalism of the protection of human rights may be a distant dream.[15]

Concluding Thoughts

To recap, I have argued in this chapter that the ESC provides a unique opportunity for grappling with the complexities of both "Europe" and "queer." In Eurovision, we find a continuing movement between the assertion of stable collective identities, and their refusal. We see currents of normalization as well as transgression. But we also observe a tension between the assertion and performance of a stable, knowable European identity, and the troubling of national and transnational identities, and the inclusions and exclusions wrought in their name. We experience moments when identity is clearly being (re)imagined through the desire for inclusion. But we also find occasions when the boundary of what constitutes "European" is firmly closed and policed along sexual, racial, ethnic and other vectors. Like queer, the ESC sometimes demonstrates that the performative is clearly political, but it also highlights the dangers of depoliticization, in which queer (like Europe) can become a universal divorced from political specificity.

Finally, Eurovision underscores an ongoing tension at the heart of both queer and Europe today--the struggle over the meaning of community and identity. In this regard, I would argue that it is appropriate (but not for the reasons given by EU officials) that the motto of the European Union is unity in diversity. The format of the ESC is framed around the same idea--that identity can be constructed through the diversity of its members--who together constitute more than the sum of their parts. At its highest, Eurovision "plays an important role in bringing people together to debate and act together and forge a common reality that is secured by our equality of difference" (Lister and Pia 66). But what queer, like Europe, equally illustrates is what Nikki Sullivan has described as a "fracturing process," in which the idea(l) of community and identity is revealed to be impossible (148). The ESC, in my view, in

its endless attempt to construct a unity out of diversity, destabilizes the logic of community through the display of "multiplicity, heterogeneity, or *difference*" and "through the transgression of boundaries, identities, sociality" (148). Thus, as queer has highlighted, and Europe has demonstrated so thoroughly, the search for a unitary identity ultimately is futile, and should be eschewed in favor of more contingent notions of belonging, membership and affiliation, in which the inside/out boundary is replaced by more fluid and provisional ideas of membership which may be contingent on particular political goals and projects. Although for queers in Europe--such as those in Moscow today--stable notions of identity may have a strategic political usefulness, I would argue that, in the long run, the violence of identity demands more open textured and nuanced readings of who "we" are.

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[1] Raykoff defines camp as "a performative practice invested in the rearrangement of power structures and values" (8).

[2] Defined by Allatson as "a yearning to familiarise the exotic and to exoticise the familiar" (90).

[3] As demonstrated some years ago in Britain during Channel 4's gay magazine format television series *Out*, which "spiced up an item comparing the laws pertaining to homosexuality in the countries that make up the European Community. A worthy topic, but potentially dry as dust, so *Out* turned it into a mock-up of the Eurovision Song Contest" (Medhurst 86).

[4] For example, the EU's new Agency for Fundamental Rights has produced an extensive report (at the request of the European Parliament) on homophobia and discrimination, for use in preparing new, broadly based anti-discrimination law (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights).

[5] For example, Eurovision is broadcast in Australia, where it has a large and devoted following (Douglas).

[6] The group was named Sestre, and comprised Miss Daphne, Miss Emperatrizz, and Miss Marlena.

[7] See Zielonka 69. In this regard, Williams describes the EU's approach to human rights as "ironic," because of the gulf between the approach internally and externally to the EU, and because of the gap between universalizing rhetoric (deployed externally) and actual internal Community practice. See also Weiner.

[8] The world wide web contains contains a plethora of complaints from viewers outraged by what they perceive to be unjustifiable results--in terms of "merit"--each year. This is instantly revealed by typing "Eurovision" and "outrage" into any search engine.

[9] See Delanty and Rumford 36. On the inside/out binary in queer theory and politics, see Fuss.

[10] The performance of Russian girl duet t.A.T.u. at ESC 2003, in which the teenagers' "lesbians affectations" subsequently were revealed simply to be a "commercial ploy," provides a good example of this phenomenon in the Contest (Heller 111).

[11] Tobin 26. On the relationship of legal rights and responsibilities, sexual citizenship, and popular culture, see Cossman.

[12] I am grateful to Marett Leiboff for pointing this out to me.

[13] For example, for a fascinating analysis of the historical "whiteness" of Eurovision, see Mutsaers.

[14] Her victory was certainly read widely (in some parts of Europe) as the product of regional bloc voting.

[15] See Tzortzi. As evidenced by the cancelation in September 2009 of a gay pride march in Belgrade "due to security concerns" (Lowen).

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