

# Global Queer Politics

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José Fernando Serrano-Amaya

# Homophobic Violence in Armed Conflict and Political Transition

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José Fernando Serrano-Amaya  
Bogota, Colombia

Global Queer Politics

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*Y una vez más, a mi madre, María Helena Amaya. Es gracias a ella que he entendido lo que es luchar por hacerse una vida digna de vivirse.*

## SERIES EDITOR FOREWORD

Homophobia has become central to the global political agenda. While media and academic attention to the issue has increased recently, sexual minority rights entered the national and international policy discussions since the mid-1990s. In national contexts, these rights emerged as demands around anti-discrimination and, in some cases, as claims over same-sex marriage. In multilateral fora, calls for the application of human rights law in relation to sexual orientation can be retraced back to the 1995 Beijing IV World Conference on Women. In the course of the last ten years, however, debates around the human rights violations based on sexual orientation have intensified significantly at the United Nations and other global and regional multilateral institutions, such as the World Bank and the Organization of American States. Moreover, the fight against homophobia has been formally included into the foreign policies of numerous countries of the Global North. Homophobia is now solidly a part of global queer politics.

Yet, homophobia as a concept has acquired an almost depoliticized veneer, as it has simply come to be understood in international discussions as hatred and violence against homosexuals. In many cases, and over centuries, the deployment of anti-homosexual violence by regimes has been, nevertheless, inherently political: it has selectively been used by state actors in the pursuit of particular political agendas.

As editors of the Global Queer Politics book series, we are very pleased to present Fernando Serrano-Amaya's *Homophobic Violence in Armed Conflict and Political Transition*, a critical analysis of state-sponsored violence against homosexuals in armed conflicts and political transitions.

As Serrano-Amaya suggests, the concept of homophobia has been developed in non-conflict settings and in direct relationship to discussions over identity politics. In his fascinating study, which looks at the cases of Colombia and South Africa, Serrano-Amaya deconstructs binary understandings of homophobic violence and argues that it contributes to the creation of inclusions, exclusions and hierarchies that constitute the dynamics of political conflicts. Building on scholarship that has looked at the intersection of gender and political conflict, he brings back the political to discussions of homophobia, challenging current conceptualizations that see it as a unified and singular political phenomenon.

Using research evidence from ethnographies, *Homophobic Violence in Armed Conflict and Political Transition* explores anti-homosexual violence as experienced by victims in both countries. The reconstruction of the memories of events that caused suffering in the affected individuals and communities demonstrates that these are not simply facts, but, rather, that the use of homophobia in political transitions, such as the one that happened in South Africa, creates a new configuration of events which in turn contributes to the emergence of political subjects. In the case of Colombia, Serrano-Amaya's analysis suggests that homophobic violence has been used by the state as a means of control of specific populations, but it also shows that it has not been a fixed pattern: it has varied according to particular political junctures. In the case of South Africa, his analysis suggests that this type of violence was intrinsically connected to apartheid, yet it was perpetrated by the regime in a selective and rationalized way to fit the interests of a system that reinforced militarised masculinities in a militarised society.

The reconstruction of experiences of homophobia among victims in these two contexts raises several research challenges and has important implications for someone who has been involved in both academia and activism. The author's engagement of these issues captures rather well the debates that we present in *Global Queer Politics*, a series that has as one of its main objectives, furthering a conversation between academia and activism. We are delighted to include this very fine piece of work in the series.

Jordi Díez  
Sonia Corrêa  
David Paternotte  
Matthew Waites

## PREFACE

If you think you understand sexual politics, read this remarkable book, and think again. You are likely to see the embodiment, power, violence and survival in new ways. You may even have a new understanding of truth.

This is a book with important intellectual messages, which also tells gripping stories based on adventurous research. Dr Serrano set out to explore sexual questions in two societies that have gone through massive social trauma in recent history: South Africa, through the violent racist apartheid regime and its collapse, and Colombia, through the peak of the longest-running armed civil conflict in the world. His initial plan was to understand the role of homophobic violence in these conflicts and in the transition to peace and nation building.

He has certainly done that, but he has done much more. Dr Serrano's research has opened up the whole terrain of sexual politics in the crucible of armed conflict and social transformation. This required him to create databases from the archives of violence, to collect intimate life stories from marginalised people and to rethink the state itself, not just as an agent in sexual politics, but as a product of sexual politics.

This kind of research is hard to do, for more than one reason. People on the social margins, many of whom have been targeted themselves, have little reason to trust researchers. The historical record about violence against them is fragmentary, often inaccessible, sometimes simply missing. And research on trauma is traumatic for the researcher too. I learned this during the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Australia, when colleagues and friends were dying while researchers groped towards prevention strategies.

In the face of all this, Dr Serrano has brought off an engaged, ethical and powerfully illuminating programme of research. Himself an activist and educator in Colombia, he has an insider's understanding of the issues. But he has also taken great care to learn, understand and present to the reader a range of different experiences of sexual politics from the two countries. The "insider/outsider" formula is too simple for this. The approach involves a search for broad perspective *as part of* close engagement and sympathy.

By broad perspective, I mean really broad. This book centres on the two national cases of South Africa and Colombia, but those are not all it concerns. Dr Serrano has also looked at these issues internationally, and draws on research about sexual politics and modern conflict from across the world. The lessons he draws are relevant far beyond his two main cases. *Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur*. With the name changed, the story applies to you.

One of the great strengths of this book is its grounding in specific life stories. Dr Serrano conducted 56 detailed interviews with people involved in these events in the two countries. He then spent a long time analysing the interviews, writing a series of close-focus case studies before attempting an overall interpretation. This is a very intensive research method, requiring patience as well as insight. But the method can be exceptionally rewarding, and this research shows it.

A number of these accounts are threaded through the pages of this book: the stories of Zoraya, Lena, Carolina and Jorge, Misa, Funeka, Nadia, Sheila and Baliswe, and shorter parts of other stories. I won't try to summarise any of them here, they need to be read direct. If the reader wants a quick introduction, try the first and the last: Zoraya's story of a *chicatrans* from Colombia in Chap. 3 and Baliswe's survivor/activist story from South Africa in Chap. 7.

Though these are fascinating tales in themselves, Dr Serrano is doing more than telling stories. He has thought about the form of the story, and the way life narratives are crafted under the pressures of social power.

This issue has been raised in the global-North literature about transsexual women's life stories, but in a static way, presuming there's a social template they all follow. Dr Serrano goes beyond this to show how life stories are crafted in changing power contexts, as multiple social actors—some of them carrying guns—try to shape the social world. The crafting is far from a passive process. Indeed, Dr Serrano finally sees the life narratives as a form of subaltern agency. They are among the ways in which marginalised people claim the power of interpretation for themselves and claim a place in the world.

Interpretation and meaning matter; but this is not a post-structuralist story about identities, norms and discourses. The life stories themselves tell us that. This is tougher stuff altogether. The stories involve gang rapes, murders, public executions, death threats, forced exile and dispossession, prison and the intimidation of whole communities by armed forces.

The armed forces involved are not just the usual suspects on the political right. Doubtless the right-wing forces, that is, the army, police and paramilitaries, have accounted for more deaths than their opponents in both South Africa and Colombia. Yet insurgent forces, in these countries and others (e.g. Peru, with *Sendero Luminoso*, *Shining Path*), have also been involved in intimidation, rape and murder. Dr Serrano is alert to the importance of class and race inequalities, but doesn't play a blame game. It is the socially pervasive violence of the conflict itself, creating a world of insecurity and fear that is centrally at issue here.

That understanding leads Dr Serrano to a sustained rethinking of familiar concepts in social and sexual analysis. A whole series of them, in fact: homophobia, the state, violence, subjectivity, agency and intersectionality. I will focus on the first two.

The idea of "homophobia" is the starting point of the project, but not the end point. Particularly in Chap. 5, but in fact through the whole book, Dr Serrano subjects this idea to sustained scrutiny and critique. Its early form, as a psychological concept identifying a neurotic fear of homosexuals, is plainly inadequate to the larger scale of sexual politics.

Yet, the later attempts to define "political homophobia" as a strategy used by political forces to threaten opponents and mobilise support are also problematic. Dr Serrano examines the fine detail of campaigns of intimidation, and shows that the targeting of homosexuals is not distinct from the targeting of other vulnerable groups. Further, their vulnerability is not just a matter of sexual or gender hierarchy but is connected to poverty, unemployment, racism, displacement and other processes that go back to the colonial legacy. There is, as he puts it, "a conglomerate of violences," rather than a single dimension of hierarchy and marginalisation.

In the same way, the concept of the state comes under scrutiny. In commonsense terms, the state is an obvious fact—we can see it, in the political leadership, the army, the bureaucracy, the laws. But how far does the state extend in fact? How do we understand its boundaries when some of its functions are exercised by local elites; or by irregular armed forces allied to those local elites; or, even more dramatically, by insurgent armed forces?

Dr Serrano shows that these are not hypothetical cases, but are realities on the ground. Both paramilitary forces and guerrillas seek to act like the

state, to rule territory, and in doing that, to exercise control over local communities. They make and enforce laws, deal out rewards and punishments, and they apply those powers, among other things, to gender relations and sexuality. What the Canadian feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith called “the relations of ruling” are here constructed and reconstructed locally, through violence, in unpredictable sequences. The state is not a given, it is constantly in question, under challenge, in the process of being made.

A lot of what we take for granted in social science assumes order and regularity, assumes that everyone obeys the rules and that everyone peaceably drives on the right side of the road. Suddenly in this book, we are considering situations where we cannot make those assumptions at all—and where, of course, most people don’t have cars to drive. Read on, therefore, for significant challenges to much of conventional social science!

Dr Serrano not only develops important criticisms of existing concepts, he is also generating new concepts or new ways of using existing terms. For instance, Chap. 3 introduces the term *parapolitica*, para-politics. This word was invented in Colombia to name the political process that has developed around the connections between paramilitary forces and both local and national political actors. Dr Serrano develops from this the concept of “sexual para-politics,” referring to the policies imposed by armed groups to regulate the lives of women and men in areas (perhaps temporarily) under their control.

This is, I think, a useful way of thinking about the politics of sexuality in other circumstances where local violence is deployed to enforce gender and sexual privilege. The group violence against lesbian women, mis-called “corrective rape” in South Africa, is a case in point. I also think this offers a useful way to think about domestic violence in settings where violent husbands, believing (sometimes correctly) that they have community support, set out to coerce wives and children.

In Dr Serrano’s treatment, the idea of sexual para-politics becomes part of an important rethinking of violence. We are familiar now with the idea that violence is not just reactive, but is also productive. It has a downstream, it has effects. This is an important theme in criminological discussions of the fact that most crime is enacted by men. Crime, including violent crime, is not an expression of existing masculinity so much as an attempt to achieve masculinity, or a desired version of masculinity.

Dr Serrano goes a level beyond this. He shows the productivity of violence in constructing a whole sexual and gender order. That includes desired versions of masculinity, but also proper places for women, and places of abjection or expulsion for subjects like *travestis*, homosexual men and lesbians. Such a gender order is not just the tidy arrangement of “sex roles,” familiar in the older literature on gender, or the heteronormativity of more recent theory. It includes those matters, but goes beyond them: it involves economic arrangements concerning livelihood, privilege and poverty. And it goes beyond those matters too: for such a gender order is also a regime of life and death. There is, as Achille Mbembe put it, a necropolitics here.

Yet this productivity, while far-reaching, is neither uniform nor continuous. It is uneven, complex and operates in changing contexts. In Chap. 5, Dr Serrano uses the adjective *chiaroscuro* for the “spaces created by the interactions between socio-political violence, gender and sexuality,” and I think that is apt. It is a term from art history, naming the interplay of light and dark in Renaissance paintings that created their sense of form and drama. The real-life productivity of the conglomerate of social violence comes out of a ragged, shifting background, lit by lightning flashes and rarely settling into a single pattern.

One can understand, therefore, why the orderly concepts of conventional social science are in question. They have an imperfect grip on social conditions where, as the South African feminist Jane Bennett once put it, “relative chaos, gross economic disparities, displacement, uncertainty and surprise” are the *norm*, not the exception. It is difficult to offer generalisations across the *chiaroscuro*, to state simple and general truths—however much we yearn for them.

In Chap. 6, Dr Serrano comes to a sustained reflection on truths. That’s an issue that emerged in the peacemaking process itself, as shown by South Africa’s famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission—much admired, and sometimes imitated, in other countries.

But truths have an uncertain politics, even where an institutional form for their expression exists. As this book shows, it was not easy for questions of sexual para-politics to get heard in the TRC. That was not just because of the Commission’s own priorities. Activists had to make their own judgements of what to pursue, what to reveal, what to place on record. In both South Africa and Colombia, the international language of “human rights” arrived in the peacemaking process, bringing a powerful framework for representing oppression or exclusion—but one that did not necessarily match local events.

An official un-knowing about sexual politics, and semi-official languages such as human rights discourse, therefore co-exist with truths that come out of personal experiences and local situations. Dr Serrano speaks at one point of the “micro-truths” that exist outside the formal languages of power. It is an idea to ponder.

Where does this leave social science? The study certainly points away from the mechanical, positivist model of social science that was powerfully criticised half a century ago, but seems to be making a comeback now. Dr Serrano has given us an important and thought-provoking study, largely because he is *not* trying for an abstracted, ahistorical model of sexuality, violence and political transition. As he emphasises in Chap. 7, he sees these matters in their historicity: located in place and time, processes of becoming. He is able to see creation and transformation in individual lives; in local gender and sexual orders; in the making and remaking of states; and even, I think, in the international order.

Social science is itself strongly affected by the global economic and political order. Social-scientific theories and methods have largely been constructed in the global North, the centre/metropole both for the old empires and the new neoliberal economy and communications system. Dr Serrano is well informed about the social and cultural sciences of the metropole, and makes effective use of them from time to time. But he is not captive to them. This highly original study of sexual and gender politics in two countries of the global South shows forcefully how another social science is possible.

And how it might contribute to another possible world! I remarked earlier that this is engaged social science. Its author has been active in struggles for peace, justice and reconciliation. The kind of knowledge this book produces is not a slick formula for a solution, but much deeper understanding of what is involved—what the experiences have been, what strategies have been followed, what accommodations have been made and what intransigent realities remain. Tough stuff, indeed; but the kind of knowledge we desperately need for action in the real world.

Sydney  
1 May 2017

Raewyn Connell

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
ANC	African National Congress
APO	African People Organisation
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia
AWB	Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging—Afrikaner Resistance Movement
BACRIM	Bandas Criminales Emergentes
BiH	Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina
CCB	Civil Cooperation Bureau
CIJP	Comisión Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz
CINEP	Centro de Investigación y Educación Popular
CSVR	Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation
CVR	Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación
ECHR	European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional
FARC EP	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Ejército del Pueblo
GASA	Gay Association of South Africa
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
ILGA	International Gay and Lesbian Organisation
LAGO	Lesbians and Gays against Oppression
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
LIGMA	Lesbian and Gay Men Action Zagreb
MK	Umkhonto we Sizwe
MOLH	Movimiento de Liberación Homosexual de Lima
MRTA	Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru

NCGLE	National Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Equality
NP	National Party
NUSAS	National Association of South African Students
OLGA	Organisation of Lesbian and <i>Gay</i> Activists
PAGAD	People against Gangsterism and Drugs
PCP-SL	Partido Comunista del Peru Sendero Luminoso
POWA	People Opposing Women Abuse
SADF	South African Defence Forces
SAP	South African Police
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organization
TAC	Treatment Action Campaign
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission