

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Ryan R. Thoreson**, *Transnational LGBT Activism: Working for Sexual Rights Worldwide*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780816692712 (cloth); ISBN: 9780816692743 (paper)

Ryan R. Thoreson's book is a fascinating and welcome contribution to scholarly and activist writing on transnational LGBT-focused human rights NGOs. Responding to powerful criticisms of this kind of LGBT activism as complicit in imperialist and neo-colonial politics (Massad 2007; Puar 2013), primarily advancing universalist Western understandings of sexualities and gender identities, Thoreson offers an in-depth and reflexive ethnography exploring the inner workings of one such NGO— the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (<http://iglhrc.org/>). I admit to a moment of concern upon starting to read— concern that this would be a combative apologia determined to rubbish critiques, or a “Not All NGOs...” piece lionising the unique contribution of IGLHRC. Instead I was delighted to find a thoughtful and accessible book of tremendous interdisciplinary value to geographers of sexualities and gender identities; social policy and management scholars; human rights theorists and campaigners; and to activists involved in work on sexualities and gender identities. Thoreson takes care not to offer up a simplistic defence of IGLHRC (at which he worked as a research fellow during his doctoral fieldwork), focusing instead on the actual practices and discourses of the organisation and its “brokers” (p.11) in the form of staff. Using deep ethnographic research, Thoreson aims to highlight *how* LGBT human rights are re/constructed, mobilised, and implemented through LGBT human rights organisations such as IGLHRC. In this short review I outline how he goes about this, noting his key arguments and the unique contributions of his research.

The book runs to six numbered chapters as well as an introduction and conclusion, with extensive notes and an index, as well as a list of abbreviations at the beginning—those

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familiar with the language of transnational NGOs will not be surprised at the need for this, and I found myself flicking to this list with some regularity. The introduction positions the rest of the book in relation to aforementioned critiques of Western LGBT-focused NGOs, particularly regarding the deployment of LGBT human rights which Thoreson notes is a “category in flux” (p.4). Thoreson also reflects critically on his own identifications with and beyond IGLHRC, and outlines his methodology of “just doing the work that brokers do” (p.15), drawing on Gavin Brown’s (2007) conception of “observant participation” as a means of engaging with an organisation’s material practices. There is also a welcome note on terminologies regarding Thoreson’s usage of “LGBT” and a wider array of sexualities and gender identities. The history and growth in use of the LGBT acronym has yet to be fully tracked, but in an era of its widespread use by Western states and transnational NGOs it feels vital to frame such terminology amidst a wider context.

Chapter 1 provides a history of IGLHRC from its formation to the present day, with Thoreson noting particular trends and shifts in political or discursive emphasis as well as the wider contexts in which the organisation has been positioned. In highlighting these shifts within and without the organisation Thoreson begins to evidence his broader argument of the contested and fluid nature of LGBT human rights. This history also feels valuable in its own right—there is much to be gained and much further interesting work which could emerge from greater explorations of the messy histories of supposedly fixed and professionalised organisations. The following chapters expound upon key elements of IGLHRC’s work. In Chapter 2 Thoreson details his use of “brokerage” as a concept to understand the work of IGLHRC staff (at the time of research a group of heterogeneous identities and politics)—brokers are those who are “mediating between different constituencies to make...projects possible” (p.11). There is also a brief but excellent account of how the micro-geographies of office space related to the organisation’s work (p.72-75). In Chapter 3 he discusses how

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human rights and LGBT politics have hybridised as a LGBT human rights framework, noting brokers' frustrations but also continuing identifications with other forms of sexual and gendered politics, and demonstrating how brokers would trouble or even rework this framework through IGLHRC. Across Chapters 2 and 3 it is made clear that many brokers themselves resisted "mainstream" LGBT political agendas often assumed to be accepted by LGBT NGOs, such as same-sex marriage or LGBT hate crime legislation (p.119).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the actual practices of IGLHRC—how it "does" LGBT human rights. Chapter 4 concentrates on the organisation's partnerships with a wide variety of groups around the world. Thoreson's juxtaposition of the "ideal" of partnership with the actual, messy, and often ad hoc practices of partnership work is revealing, and geographers will be interested to see space and place emerging as key features of why and how some partnerships came to be, taking primacy over, for example, shared principles (p.128-129). Chapter 5 reflects on IGLHRC's role in producing and circulating knowledge, particularly regarding doubt and legitimacy—the expansive and tenuously connected geographies involved, both physical and communicative, are once more crucial here. Thoreson points out that the legitimacy and thus existence of Northern LGBT NGOs such as IGLHRC is predicated on engagement with and support from Southern LGBT organisations (p.157). Although this deftly challenges easy North/South dynamics with regard to LGBT human rights, I felt that there was something interesting in this point which could have been brought out through the lens of transnational institutional hybridities—indeed I was surprised not to see this, given the use of hybridity to explore IGLHRC's LGBT + human rights approach earlier (p.119). What new politics and power relations might come to the fore if we understand such institutions to extend and yet be constituted in part beyond brokers and bases?

Chapter 6 takes us into the sphere of human rights institutions such as the UN, where the organisation's constant presence and activities emerge as a long-term strategy of

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discursively producing sexual and gendered subjects as “real” where they would otherwise go denied or unacknowledged, and sedimenting the discussion of their needs as normal and legitimate. I suspect that this “fake it ‘til you make it” (p.194) approach by LGBT organisations is both common and potent. Thoreson then concludes by advocating for more attention to the practices rather than ontologies of human rights. He also re-emphasises the importance of organisational brokers in constructing a shifting, contested, and tactical body of LGBT human rights.

Regarding this final point, the practices of “everyday” organisational workers are certainly of immense importance not just to organisations themselves but to the wider array of social, political, and legal contexts within which they are enmeshed—“small figures, with their own aspirations as well as those foisted upon them, together with their little instruments” (Miller and Rose 2008: 6; see also Ahmed 2012)—and Thoreson makes this point superbly. However, other figures hover over the narrative (p.36, 62), also implicated in the fluctuating discursive and political networks through which LGBT human rights are being produced. IGLHRC employees’ agency was emphasised as “brokers” while that of other actors such as the organisation’s board and funders seemed less clear—surely these actors are also involved in negotiating between multiple constituencies with regard to the organisation? It would likely be revealing to see future research building on Thoreson’s significant work here, capturing an even greater array of institutional actors and negotiations—again, hybridity might be a useful means of exploring this.

This book would be valuable for capturing the behind-the-scenes histories, stories, and inside processes of IGLHRC alone, laying bare the mix of ad hoc messiness and long-term strategy in its everyday practices. Such detailed and critical reflections bely the popular image of the hyper-professional and mechanistic NGO as well as politically potent yet simplistic geographic imaginaries of North/South and the West/the Rest. On top of this,

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though bearing in mind that he concentrates on only one organisation, Thoreson has produced a fascinating development of critiques and studies of LGBT human rights and the organisations which advocate for (and, as Thoreson demonstrates, produce) them.

## References

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Nick McGlynn  
School of Environment and Technology  
University of Brighton  
n.mcglynn2@brighton.ac.uk

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