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QUEER THEORY AND PERMANENT WAR

Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir K. Puar

Can queer theory be recognizable as such when it emerges from elsewhere? This is the central question that guides our thinking on the intersections between queer theory and area studies, in our case the study of the Middle East as transnational. We come to this question in thinking through disciplinary and archival locations of knowledge production, and the political, economic, and social cartographies that animate both queer theory and the study of the Middle East. Finally, we outline some of the recent theoretical contributions of work that thinks across the boundedness of “queer theory” and “Middle Eastern studies,” and revisit the question of what queer theory may look like when it is not routed through Euro-American histories, sexualities, locations, or bodies.

The United States remains foundational to queer theory and method, regardless of the location, area, archive, or geopolitical history. (This is still largely the case even in Europe, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.) US archives and methods appear to make legible and illegible all other geohistories. We note that this is not a new problematic.

Much of the early work of queer theory in the 1990s sought to trace the flows of “queer” as a hegemonic traveling formation that followed the circuits of US Empire. In attempting to mark the complex negotiations and resistances to such purported external impositions, the “local” in the global south was unwittingly reified as raw data, often through the purview of “sexuality studies,” in relation to an ever-entrenching “global.”

And yet, several decades later, despite many trenchant interventions, such epistemic issues remain. Commodifications of area, and of the local, result in a twofold movement. It is not just that queer theory is unconsciously enacting an area studies parochialization: queer theory as American studies. More trenchantly,

other areas become visible and refracted only through this parochialization. Thus the formulation of this roundtable is notable. “Queer Theory and Area Studies” suggests that queer theory itself remains unmarked and unencumbered by location. (We could, in fact, rename this roundtable “American Studies and Area Studies,” or “Queer Theory as Area Studies.”) This may well be a problem hardly specific to queer theory and more generalizable in terms of the US academy as a hegemonic and traveling formation. After all, both authors of the present article were educated at the graduate level and now research and teach in the American academy—one is trained in or teaches area studies and anthropology, while the other is an “Americanist,” an invisibilized area studies formation from which all other area studies are derived and defined. Another example of this is the number of US women’s, gender, and sexuality studies departments that have now set up franchises in not only western European countries but also eastern and southern European as well as global south locations. This geopolitically uninflected variety of queer theorization, which does not recognize itself as redoubling homonationalist tendencies, also tends to be resistant to knowledge produced under the purview of an “area studies formation.” This is perhaps due partly to the fear of the area studies disciplinary mandate to situate, locate, and circumscribe, a mandate that might seem antithetical to the antifoundationalist impulses of queerness. Furthermore, rarely is the scholarship of queer theorists hailed as epitomizing the best potential of area studies formations. At the outset, the work of queer theorists in area studies (rarely read by queer theory as “Queer Theory” and often relegated to “sexuality studies”) is understood as a “case study” of specifics rather than an interruption of the canonical treatments of the area studies field at large.

While we are thoroughly convinced of the critique of area studies that transnational feminist theorizing instantiated more than three decades ago, and while we are critical of the (changing) conservative nature of the field (the *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* and the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* have been key to this change), we remain observant of certain aporias. The transnational frame, popular in contemporary queer theory and sexuality studies, is often routed through the west, resulting either in west to the rest or in theoretical and comparatively based triangles with the United States or western Europe at the apex. Rarely are the locations of area studies themselves understood as transnational; the Middle East, for example, is a historically, politically, and economically deeply transnational region unto itself.

Is there any way to negotiate or avoid altogether this call-and-response circuit that continually repositions the United States as arbiter and funnel for the legibility of theory elsewhere, and the arbiter of what is to come, to be learned or

apprehended? We would call for a politics in queer theory that works to displace the United States as the prehensive force for everyone else's future—the arrival point on a transnational journey of progress. That is to ask, why is the critique of the production of US nationalism within queer theory itself not not central, rather than incidental, to queer theorizing, given that the privileged site of the United States so thoroughly shapes what queer is, what it can do, and how it forms a field of knowledge that can affect the rendering of queer bodies elsewhere? Is queer theory in the United States indeed homonationalist, indebted to an uninterrogated nationalism in order to further its capacitation, its (imperial) reach? Further, as Joanne Barker (2011) and Scott Morgensen (2011) and others point out, queer theory enacts a settler subjectivity in its invocation of futurity and its narrative of progress. We must complicate or reject the prehensive force of histories and presents of the United States precisely in order to study the relations between settler colonialism, colonialism and imperialism on the one hand and queer theory on the other. Other imperial histories, including Ottoman, British, German, Italian, and French, are crucial. These imperial networks, much like the imperial network of US hegemony today, were global and transregional and, crucially, often in competition over different parts of the Middle East. Techniques of rule, representation, sexual regulation, and morality, in addition to colonial bureaucrats themselves, traveled within this imperial network—from Bombay to London to Cairo to Calcutta and from Paris to Sudan to Algeria to Syria and back to Paris. The theoretical archive that forms the background picture of queer theory is itself deeply invested in, and in part produced out of, these imperial, colonial, and settler colonial contexts and conversations. Queer scholarship in Middle East studies is diverse and full of debate. One framework suggests understanding the rubrics of sexuality and gender as multiple and translated across geopolitical locations and homo/hetero, queer/hetero binaries (e.g., Najmabadi 2005, 2013). Yet another argues for the need to posit sexuality as a form of colonial governmentality that legislated an affective and structural relational of modernity through its cohesion in legislative but not necessarily populist arenas (e.g., Massad 2008, 2015).

We are interested in recent work in the field that reads the registers of sexuality and queerness as infinitely imbricated in biopolitical forms of control. Jasbir's work on Palestine demonstrates how pinkwashing and the activist response to it displace the intense regulation of racial reproductive technologies of the Israeli state. Her current work on Gaza looks at practices of bodily and infrastructural debilitation that challenges biopolitical distinctions between living and dying through the production of radically altered corporeal forms (Puar 2015). Maya's work attends to the ways that mainstream sexuality rights discourse is conversant

with the masculinist, capitalist, racial, and sectarian nature of the Lebanese state and with discourses on Islam, homophobia, and secularism in the War on Terror (Mikdashi 2013, 2014a). She places heterosexual women and the regulation of heterosexual relations at the center of her queer analysis. Another project of hers attempts to think through the gendering of heteronormative men as available for killing (without mourning) in contemporary Palestine, using both settler colonial and War on Terror frames of analysis and thinking through the work that the temporality of the “crisis” does, for example, in Gaza (Mikdashi 2014b). Other examples include Paul Amar’s work, which reads against the presumption of an insistent imposition of East/West binaries, revealing a whole human security-state system that reformulates the stakes in the regulation of sexuality. In his analysis of the Queen Boat incident as about disenfranchising women’s bohemian economic circuits of ownership, he suggests that Joseph Massad’s response to Cairo 52 is quite homonationalist (Amar 2013). Sima Shaksari’s (2013, 2014) work on the sanctions regime and trans migrations and asylum politics in a War on Terror era in Iran teaches us that the biopolitical and the necropolitical technologies of war and state regulation place particular injuries above others through technologies of neoliberal recognition and international law.

The aim of this body of literature is to ask what different locations, archives, and histories generate in terms of new conversations, connections, and directions in queer and feminist theory—in many ways we aim to provincialize the United States. The larger project is to shake the cartography of critical theory itself, as Edward Said (1978, 1993) and Gayatri Spivak (1988, 1999) both argue—where “regions” are largely studied through epistemological and theoretical frameworks generated from the archives of the global north—archives that cannot be divorced from imperial histories and archives of colonialism, that cannot be read away from strategies of domination and extraction.

The transnational Middle East is a region beset with strife. There is the ongoing US occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and the preceding two Gulf Wars. The Israeli settler colonial regime in Palestine is financially enabled by the United States and has resulted in the dispersal of Palestinian refugees across several states, including Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. A cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is being fought via proxy throughout the region. The current wars in Syria are being waged by over eight foreign states in addition to the Syrian army itself and multiple transnational Islamist movements. Kurdish national aspirations continue to be colonially dominated by Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The Western Sahara continues to be colonized and settled. ISIS repeatedly bombs civilians, captures cities, and kills and makes life hell for apostates and religious and sexual minori-

ties in addition to the women in the regions they control. There is regional widespread poverty and underdevelopment partly as a result of neoliberal economic restructuring and, in the case of Iraq and Iran, internationally imposed sanctions regimes. People are living in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and revolutionary and counterrevolutionary zeal and upheaval in Egypt and Tunis. There are also many other regional and international conflicts and forms of permanent and semi-permanent war and warfare.

In such a context, what kinds of queer organizing, archives, theory, practices, visibilities, institutions, knowledge production projects emerge? The precarity of queer life is not exceptional in these sociopolitical spaces: it is additional precisely because war, genocide, occupation, oppression, dictatorship, terrorism, and killings are part of the everyday fabric of life for many people who live in the region. What kind of queer emerges in the face of revolutionary overthrow of the Mubarak regime, for example, or in the context of Lebanon, where one out of every three residents in 2015 was a refugee fleeing war in a different part of the Middle East? What animates the impulse to search for something to call or to theorize as queer? What must the queer body do, or be, to be recognized as such, and by whom? Do we want this recognition, and if so, how and for what purposes? How can we generate theory out of these locations, and if doing so, are these bodies of theory routed through area studies rather than recognized as queer theory?

For example, perhaps the term most used to describe injury against same-sex relations is *homophobia*. As a term, *homophobia* is an apt descriptor for discrimination against queers in several urban areas of the contemporary Middle East—and we have written about its circulations between the United States and the contemporary Middle East (Puar and Mikdashi 2012). However, homophobia is also a homogenizing and flattening discourse. In Beirut, the naming “homophobia” aggregates aggressions that might also be understood as gendered or racial or economic. For example, the sign “homophobia” is the marker most used to describe incidents where working-class or racialized migrant laborers engaging in male-male sexual behaviors are attacked or brutalized. Perhaps this is not surprising given the everydayness of violence (sexual, physical, psychological) directed against migrant labor (including “domestic labor”) or refugees. With the description of homophobia, the ordinariness of these assemblages of racial and classed violence are marked and are routed through LGBTQ rights groups and organizations and discourses that circulate transnationally. These organizations and discourses operate by universalizing particular injuries. Transnational LGBTQ rights discourse, meanwhile, is not only anchored in US-based queer histories and movements. It is also anchored in, and anchors, white, cisgendered, masculinist, and

middle-class queer histories that are elevated through the elision of race, sex, and class domination in the United States. Once emptied of located and ongoing histories of domination, the “global LGBTQ movement” can emerge as such.

We are turning from the now obvious preoccupation with queer organizations, activism, and the naming of queer bodies, optics that are largely mobilized in queer theory as American studies as evidence of queer vitalism or “sexuality studies.” We note, rather, that an urgent issue for those who work in and from the perspective of transnational Middle East studies (those of us whose archives are located there) is: How can queer theory emerge and converse with the mass corporeal losses and debilities of war? Does queer theory (still) require a sexual or gendered body or a sexual or gendered injury—particularly if part of the project of homonationalism is to produce and stabilize transnational, imperial, and settler colonial forms of sexual and gendered injury? Perhaps, thinking from a location where war and colonization are quotidian contexts of life, we should rethink what sexual injury is, and the economic, political, and military work that designations of “sexual” or “gendered” injury and violence does in the first place. How do these designations affect which deaths or injuries are internationally nameable and mournable and which deaths are merely “collateral damage” in the contemporary Middle East? What gendered and racial archives are being invoked with every deployment of those now ubiquitous words, *collateral damage*?

In Palestine, for example, the kinds of quotidian practices that are restricted through intensely militarized securitization and border surveillance produce a severely restrained economy of corporeality. There are and have been organizations such as Aswat, Al-qaws, and Palestinian Queers for Boycott Divestment Sanctions that name queer resistance as primarily about resisting the occupation. But other forms of bodily experience, such as stunting, the medical diagnosis for the slowing down of childhood development which prohibits “normal” maturation into adulthood, occur through Israeli practices of calorie counting, shooting to maim, exposure to weapon toxicities, and the erosion of water, health, and electric infrastructures. These practices create populations of altered and experimental corporeal humans, the transfiguration of human forms sustained through the decimation of health infrastructure that could transform the crippled into the disabled. They do so structurally, as medically impossible rehabilitations that might redeem the cripple as the disabled. Do we want to claim cripples as queer bodies, especially when those bodies neither present a challenge to the normative nor signal a transgressive nonnormativity but undo this very binary opposition through their endemic presence?

The proliferation of corporeal difference is multiple and diffuse. Depleted

uranium in Iraq from both Gulf Wars has led to an astonishing increase in congenital birth defects and cancer rates (Dewachi 2013). Afghanistan has the largest population of people living with prosthetic appendages, from legs to arms to eyes to penises. Do we want to call these bodies—partly the result of US imperial occupation and domination—queer bodies? (This claiming of disability as queerness has been proffered in the US context by disability studies but is rarely taken up in queer theory. On the rare occasions that disability is central to queer analyses, it is deployed as an intersectional figuration—disability as queerness/the queer disabled—rather than seen as a biopolitical vector that might alter the terms of queerness and its legible corporealities altogether.) Should we remain wedded to queer theory's general obsession and commitment to the sexualized human form to recognizable "queer sexualities," given that the war on terror has thus far killed at least 1.3 million people (a conservative estimate) in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan alone? These casualty numbers do not reflect killing in Syria, Yemen, or Somalia, arenas that have also been declared by the United States as part of the Global War on Terror—nor do the numbers reflect US allies' own self-termed wars of and on terror in the region, such as Saudi Arabia's war on its own people and on Yemen or Israel's folding of its colonization of Palestine and its wars on Lebanon into the United States led War on Terror framework. The 1.3 million dead statistic also leaves out the vast number of injured and permanently disabled and debilitated that conveniently drop out of the calculation of collateral damage. The men, women, and children in these countries and regions have been made available for killing, brutalization, and debilitation partly through sexualized, gendered, classed, and racialized transnational discourses about Islam, Arabs, and the Middle East. Importantly, these discourses were not created in 2001 with the launch of the War on Terror, but the War on Terror does represent the contemporary pinnacle of the circulation and weaponization of these sexed, gendered, and raced discourses.

Different contexts have the potential to push conversations in queer theory in surprising directions precisely because they disturb the "taken for granted" background picture of queer theory as American studies. The relationship of area studies to queer theory is multiple, invigorating, and potentially groundbreaking—but only to the extent that both fields allow their archives, theoretical presumptions, key terms, and areas of inquiry to suffuse, confuse, and destabilize each other.

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