# Citation and Censorship: The Politics of Talking About the Sexual Politics of Israel

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**Abstract** In response to critics' claims that a discussion of sexuality and nationalism vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict bears no relation to the author's previous work, or to such discussions within the US or European contexts, this paper details the complex interconnections between Israeli gay and lesbian rights and the continued oppression of Palestinians. The first section examines existing discourses of what the author has previously called "homonationalism," or the process by which certain forms of gay and lesbian sexuality are folded into the national body as the Muslim/Arab Other is cast as perversely queer, within Israel and the diasporas. The operations of homonationalism ensure that no discussion of gay and lesbian rights in Israel is independent from the state's actions toward Palestine/Palestinians. The second section contains a critique of Israel's practices of "pinkwashing" in the US and Europe. In order to redirect focus away from critiques of its repressive actions toward Palestine, Israel has attempted to utilize its relative "gay-friendliness" as an example of its commitment to Western "democratic" ideals. Massive public relations campaigns such as "Brand Israel" work to establish Israel's reputation within the US and Europe as cosmopolitan, progressive, Westernized and democratic as compared with the backward, repressive, homophobic Islamic nations, which, in turn, serves to solidify Israel's aggression as a position of the "defense" of democracy and freedom. The final section looks at the ways in which accusations of "anti-Semitism" function in academic and activist contexts to suppress critiques of the implicit nationalism within Israeli sexual politics.

**Keywords** Israel · Palestine · Sexuality · Politics · LGBT · Pinkwashing

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This paper was presented at the 'Fundamentalism and Gender' conference at Humboldt University on December 4, 2010. The talk was presented despite last-minute accusatory and offensive communications with the conference organising committee, which expressed upset about the title of the talk (originally 'Beware Israeli Pinkwashing'), and complained that the focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had nothing to do with the conference theme, nor the author's prior work. They stated that they did not understand how her 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* related to Israel or why the author was discussing Israel at all given that, as they understood it, her work focused on feminist and queer critiques of US national/diasporic formation post-9/11. They were exclusively interested in the critique of the Western construction of the Muslim other. They also suggested that the talk was anti-Semitic, based on reading an op-ed the author published in *The Guardian* in July 2010 titled *Israel's gay propaganda war*. These concerns were communicated just 2 weeks prior to the conference, even though the paper title and information had been submitted in June of 2010.

One day prior to the start of the conference, the Director of the Humboldt Graduate School and also a conference organising committee member, Professor Christina von Braun, gave an interview to Alan Posner, a well-known Zionist and anti-Muslim journalist in Berlin. In this interview she made derogatory comments about the author's work and person, stating that the author had "lost her marbles" 1 if she deemed Israel a totalitarian state, and claiming that the author's analysis suffered because it was based on activist work. Von Braun also reiterated the conference committee's statement that the author's prior work on sexuality and nationalism was quite interesting, but the critique of pinkwashing was unrelated. The author withdrew from the conference. After the organising committee claimed that Alan Posner misstated von Braun's words, and after the author requested a public apology, a written retraction from von Braun, and a new moderator, she agreed to give her lecture. Professor Ulrike Auga made the public apology on behalf of the organising committee right before the author's talk. In January 2011 the author received an 'apology' from von Braun, which confirmed that she did indeed make the above comments in the interview. Puar is still waiting for the public written retraction of the article.

In the talk that follows, the author cites both Auga and von Braun's work to show the continuities between their positions and hers, and also cites from statements by von Braun from the interview with Alan Posner. She also demonstrates the (rather obvious) linkages between her work in *Terrorist Assemblages* (where she notes that some of the earliest forms of Islamophobia in queer organising is mobilised through the Israeli-Palestinian conflict) and the current debates about pinkwashing and homonationalism in Israel.

What I want to do with my time today is attempt to convey to you the richness and complexity of a dialogue about the relationship of gay and lesbian sexual rights to the Israel-Palestine conflict. I'm going to do this in three parts: the first part surveys the literature on sexual rights within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The interview, titled 'Geschlect als Wissenkategorie' (2010) is available at: http://starke-meinungen.de/blog/2010/12/01/geschlecht-als-wissenskategorie/.



second part examines implications of this regional framing of sexual rights for diasporic locations, specifically the US and Canada, by surveying the 'Brand Israel' campaign; and, the third section discusses some of the locational politics of this debate in the context of Germany.

#### A Long History of Homonationalism in Israel?

A growing body of academic scholarship argues that the status of gay and lesbian rights and the politics of Israel and Palestine are inextricably linked, or to quote Gil Z. Hochberg, that the relations between "the politics of homophobia" and "the politics of occupation" are intractable (2010b, p. 510). As Ulricke Auga and Christina von Braun (2008) have noted in the introduction of their edited collection, Gender in Conflicts: Palestine-Israel-Germany, "[i]n a situation of conflict, societies tend to "defame" the "conduct" of women belonging to the other society; they accuse the 'other' women of either sexual libertinism or of sexual narrowmindedness, both seen as opposed to one's own 'normality'". While unfortunately this collection from 2006 does not have any of the numerous examples already brewing of this dynamic as it relates to homosexuality in the region, the cover of the book does have an interesting photo of the Gay Pride March in Jerusalem on Christopher Street Day, 2004, depicting a graffiti wall with the words 'No Pride in Palestine' as the most prominent scrawl legible in English. A concern for how, not only women, but now especially homosexuals, have become the symbols of civilisational aptitude. In other words, the biopolitical relationship between gay lesbian queer sexualities and nationalism has indeed been relevant for some time. As anthropologist Rebecca L. Stein notes, the rise of the gay equality agenda in Israel is concomitant with the increasing repression of the Israeli state towards Palestinians. She writes:

During the 1990's, Israel's gay communities were being recognized in unprecedented ways in Israeli legal spheres, while changing Israeli policies *vis-à-vis* the occupied territories were creating new forms of un-recognition for its Palestinian population: gay communities were enjoying new forms of social mobility within the nation-state while the literal mobility of Palestinians from the occupied territories was being increasingly curtailed (2010, p. 521).

These gains in the 1990s—what is called 'Israel's gay decade'—included: protection against workplace discrimination, increasing institutionalisation of same-sex partner benefits, and greater inclusion in the Israeli Defence Forces. On the other hand, the 1993 Oslo Accords started strictly delimiting the presence of Palestinian labour pools in Israel and produced increasingly segregated living and working zones, multiplied existing surveillance systems and security checkpoints, and generally reduced the visibility and mobility of Palestinians and contact that they had with Israeli Jews. Renowned Israeli architect Eyal Weizman (2002), has done brilliant work on how the Oslo Accords created what he calls "the politics of verticality"—the dividing up of space from a two dimensional here-versus-there to a three dimensional system of air space, ground space, underground space, sacred



space, checkpoint space, that basically tripled the amount of space that could be surveilled, controlled, and fought over.

Stein asks, "How might one read these two political histories in concert?" (2010, p. 521). This formulation—of the relationship of the rise of gay and lesbian legal rights as well as popular visibility that happens in tandem with increasingly xenophobic policies in regards to minority communities within the nation-state and the Others that threaten the borders of the nation-state from outside—is exactly what I have theorised, within the context of the United States, as well as some European states, as 'homonationalism' (see Puar 2007). In some ways Jewish studies scholars have been looking at the production of homonationalism as it operates in Israel for quite some time now. Alisa Solomon was amongst the first to argue that the notion of the progressive status of gays and lesbians in Israel has fomented rivalries and divisions between orthodox and secular Israeli Jews. In a 2003 volume titled Queer Theory and the Jewish Question, edited by leading Jewish Studies scholars Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini, Solomon states: "In today's Israeli culture war, queerness—or at least the tolerance of queerness—has acquired a new rhetorical value for mainstream Zionism: standing against the imposition of fundamentalist religious law, it has come to stand for democratic liberalism" (Solomon 2004, p. 636). In this formulation, Solomon is clear that queerness has become another ground upon which the cohesion of an Israeli Zionist state is possible. A wonderful book by Adi Kuntsman (2009) looks at how, within Israeli queer communities, there is a hierarchy between more mainstream Israeli queer Jews, and Russian Israeli queers, and that the fissures between different factions do not result in equal access to the benefits of gay equality.<sup>2</sup>

Despite these internal contradictions however, as Amal Amireh notes, "the positive rhetorical function of queerness ... goes beyond those internal cultural wars (between secular Jews and religious Jews) into the wider culture war between Israelis and Palestinians, where it functions to consolidate a fractured Zionist consensus" (2010, p. 637). As von Braun points out in her recent interview with Alan Posner, this use of gay rights to reiterate the terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—those terms being that Israel is civilised, liberal, and progressive in relation to the backwardness of Palestinian society—is certainly not a new observation (I never claimed that it was 'new.'). What is 'new,' however is how these debates are being connected to transnational feminist studies and queer theory. In this regard, I want to laud the recent publication of a special issue of the GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, titled "Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel," edited by Gil Z. Hochberg (2010a), which contains fantastic essays that both historicise and contextualise the kinds of discursive and material practices that have been and continue to produce Israel's claim to 'gay friendliness' and 'gay tolerance' as somehow independent of its repressive politics towards Palestinians. These essays look at the complex co-dependent intertwining of queerness and nationalism. So for example, Hochberg (2010b) analyses the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See "Geschlect als Wissenkategorie" 2010.



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Although his analysis misreads the relationship between homonationalism and gay rights. See also Aeyal Gross (2010).

problematic Israeli patriotism produced through the mourning of the shooting of queer teenagers at the Israeli GLBT Association in August of 2009; Amalia Ziv (2010) highlights the work of Black Laundry, a queer group in Israel committed to anti-occupation activism and 'No Pride in Occupation' is a roundtable of activists, scholars, and activist-scholars in Israel, Palestine, and the diasporas who discuss the complexities of being queer in the region (Hochberg et al 2010).

## The 'Pinkwashing' Debate in the Diasporas

Now I want to elaborate upon a series of debates happening transnationally regarding what is widely termed in North American organising contexts as 'Israeli Pinkwashing'. Jason Ritchie (2010) writes that

while the significance of tolerance of homosexuality as a marker of liberal democratic modernity has perhaps declined in recent Israeli political discourse—alongside the decline of Ashkenazi hegemony and the ascendancy of Mizrahi, religious, and ultranationalist politics—that narrative still retains considerable currency in the United States and Europe, where liberal Zionists, especially queer liberal Zionists, frequently deploy it to represent Israel as "an oasis of liberal tolerance in a reactionary religious backwater" (Ritchie 2010 citing Kirchick 2009).

If it is the case, as Ritchie argues, that the production of the 'Israeli gay tolerance/ Palestinian homophobia' binary is a recognised discursive tactic of the conflict today, the reasons for why this debate has now taken hold in diasporic contexts such as the US and Canada are multiple. In part, a critique of the US global war on terror cannot be so easily separated out from a critique of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Geographer Derek Gregory has written at length about the kinds of post 9-11 foreign policy decisions that further aligned the United States and Israel in an identification as both 'victims' of Islamic fundamentalism and united in a fight against the war on terror. Gregory argues that the Israeli state used 9-11 as a moment to amplify its aggression against the Occupied Territories, and that the United States sanctioned this aggression even as they feared losing their Arab allies in their efforts to reign in Al-Qaeda (Gregory 2003). Further, as Professor von Braun herself confirms in the interview with Alan Posner, Israel's have indeed been invested in the production of Muslim societies as backwards and repressed,4 contributing in no small part to the discourses of the Muslim other as the terrorist other. Therefore, the critique of the US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamophobia (both post 9–11, and in its recent rising forms), and Israeli policies towards Palestine are contiguous political positions.

To turn now to the specific diasporic articulations of Israel's 'gay friendly' image: several years ago Israel invested in a large-scale, massively funded 'Brand Israel' campaign, produced by the Israeli Foreign Ministry, to counter its growing reputation as a colonial power. Ranked 185 out of 200 nations in an East West



<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Geschlect als Wissenkategorie 2010.

Communications survey in terms of 'positive perception,' Israel beat Pakistan (186) but not Iran (184). Targeting global cities such as New York, Toronto, and London, the 'Brand Israel' campaign has used events such as film festivals to promote its image as cultured and modern.

One of the most prominent features of the 'Brand Israel' campaign is the marketing of a modern Israel as a gay-friendly Israel. Stand With US, a self-declared Zionist organisation, has been quoted in *The Jerusalem Post* as saying, "We decided to improve Israel's image through the gay community in Israel." This 'pinkwashing,' as it is now commonly termed in activist circles, has currency beyond Israeli gay groups. Within global gay and lesbian organising circuits, to be gay friendly is to be modern, cosmopolitan, developed, first-world, global north, and most significantly, democratic. Events such as WorldPride 2006 hosted in Jerusalem and 'Out in Israel', recently held in San Francisco, highlight Israel as a country committed to democratic ideals of freedom for all, including gays and lesbians. It is important to note that homonationalism has scalar movement between local, national, and transnational sites; from the internal contradictions that homonationalism produces within Israel, to the production of Israel as liberal and progressive in relation to the homophobia of Palestine, to the level of global transnational organising where homonationalism translates—within a liberal telos of progress onto this register as well.

Thus, Israeli pinkwashing is a potent method through which the terms of Israeli occupation of Palestine are reiterated—Israel is civilised, Palestinians are barbaric, homophobic, and uncivilised. This discourse has manifold effects: it denies Israeli homophobic oppression of its own gays and lesbians (see Gross 2010 and Kuntsman 2009), and it recruits, often unwittingly, gays and lesbians of other countries into collusion with Israeli violence towards Palestine. In reproducing Orientalist tropes of Palestinian sexual backwardness, it also denies the impact of colonial occupation on the degradation and containment of Palestinian cultural norms and values. Pinkwashing harnesses global gays as a new source of affiliation by recruiting liberal gays into a dirty bargaining of their own safety against the continued oppression of Palestinians, who are now perforce re-branded as 'gay un-friendly.' This strategy then also works to elide the presence of numerous Palestinian gay and lesbian organisations, for example *Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions* (PQBDS).

Pinkwashing's effects are being widely contested, especially at gay and lesbian events and despite the censorship of gay and lesbian groups that actively oppose the Israeli occupation. The recent banning of the phrase 'Israeli Apartheid' during Pride weekend by PRIDE Toronto, in response to pressure by the City of Toronto and Israeli lobby groups, effectively barred the group *Queers Against Israeli Apartheid* (QuAIA) from the pride parade. However, on June 23rd, 2010, the ban was rescinded in response to community activism and the twenty-three Pride Award recipients who returned their prizes in protest of the ban. *Frameline's* San Francisco LGBT Film Festival faced opposition from *Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism* (QUIT), among other groups, for accepting Israeli government sponsorship. Last summer, after protests by Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and other anti-Zionist factions, the US Social Forum in Detroit cancelled a workshop slated to be held by *Stand* 



With Us on 'LGBTQI Liberation in the Middle East' that sought to promote images of Israel as a gay mecca at the expense of Palestinian liberation.

The transnational organising that is taking place in relation to this issue is very broad and involves many activists and scholars in the United States, Canada, Palestine, Israel (no doubt in Berlin too), and spans from queer of colour communities, to Palestinian activists, both in and out of Palestine, to diasporic, as well as Israeli Jews, and Palestinians. And of course, Israeli activists such as Dalit Baum have been critical of the Brand Israel campaign as well, reiterating the notion that "the flourishing of gay rights in Israel is being used by the government to divert attention from its gross violation of human rights in the Occupied Territories" (Ziv 2010, p. 537). So you can see that the constituencies that are involved in these discussions cannot be reduced to a single position: they cannot be summarily dismissed through the reductive accusations of being racist, homophobic, or anti-Semitic; they cannot be rendered within a Manichean division between right and wrong. Further, all of these organisations peaceably participate in this transnational organising with a respect accorded to the variety of locational, national and ideological differences among them.

A final twist to the diasporic production of pinkwashing—it is hardly produced by the Brand Israel campaign alone. It is increasingly the case that a stance against Israeli state-violence towards Palestinians is advocated and sanctioned, but then accompanied by an additional condemnation of Muslim sexual cultures. This has become a standard rhetorical framing produced by liberal supporters of the Palestinian cause. (Note, as another example, the messaging of *OutRage!*, Britain's premier queer human rights organisation, at a Free Palestine rally in London, May 21, 2005: 'Israel: Stop persecuting Palestine!' 'Palestine: Stop persecuting Queers!') This framing has the effect, however unintended, of analogising Israeli state oppression of Palestinians to Palestinian oppression of their gays and lesbians, as if the two were equivalent or contiguous. As numerous postcolonial scholars have convincingly demonstrated, the production of 'homophobia' in a location dealing with epistemological and material violence of colonial occupation through the use of sexuality to affirm racial and cultural superiority cannot be considered 'cultural' alone. Rather, it is at least in part a by-product of cultural domination.

It is important to consider the way that the debate about Israel and Palestine continues to anchor what I have called a homonationalist politics of sexual rights in North America and why this is significant. What is at stake is not a normative decision about whether Israel is gay-friendly or whether Palestine and other regions of the Middle East are homophobic. There is no question that Israel's legal record on gay rights suggests a certain notion of liberal 'progress'; Palestinian queers that live in the Occupied Territories also articulate how difficult it is to be 'openly' gay. But, as this scholarly literature and this political organizing demonstrates, this is only the beginning of the story. As I have argued elsewhere, the 'Woman Question' is now being supplemented with the 'Homosexual Question' (Puar 2010b). That is, in the colonial period, the question of 'how do you treat your women?' as a determining factor of a nation's capacity for sovereignty has now been appended with the barometer of 'how well do you treat your homosexuals?'



## Academic Censorship, Anti-Semitism, and Transnational Feminist Alliances

I want to bring to a close my comments with some remarks about the purported 'controversy' about this talk, a controversy that might in other locations be simply called 'an academic debate' or even a political disagreement, but not the basis for attempts to censor, micromanage, or otherwise vilify someone's work. It is a controversy that could have easily been avoided, as far as I am concerned, had open communication happened in a timely and direct fashion, instead of through third parties and interviews with hateful, anti-Muslim reporters. In general, I have had the good fortune of hearing from many people in Europe, all over North America, and Israel and Palestine, who have enthusiastically welcomed this discussion on sexual rights as they function in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For those who have attempted in various ways to censor or silence this talk, on the basis that 'in the German context' it is anti-Semitic to be critical of oppressive Israeli state practices towards the Palestinians, it has become clear to me that the desires to silence such a debate are, in fact, the very evidence of the need for this conversation to happen.

I think it is worth thinking about the accusation of anti-Semitism for a moment: from whom it comes, who benefits, and what kind of work it does. I follow, along with Judith Butler and numerous other Jewish intellectuals both inside and outside of Israel, that it is crucial to retain a distinction between anti-Semitism, which is a form of racism directed at Jewish peoples that is deeply embedded in biologically deterministic notions of race, and a critique of Israeli state practices (which is not the same thing as a stance against the existence of the Israeli state). In fact, the conflation of anti-Semitism with a position against the Israeli oppression of Palestinians is precisely what the definition of Zionism is. Furthermore, it is most important to retain this distinction because otherwise the accusation of anti-Semitism becomes empty, loses its political force, and becomes a blanket alibi for a repression of a complicated conversation around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We need the term anti-Semitism to mean something other than 'critical of Israel' because anti-Semitism still exists. Without this important and hardly semantic distinction, the charge of anti-Semitism becomes a strong projection of the history of the Holocaust onto the bodies of 'outsiders' like myself, those not directly interpellated by that history, as a classic form of psychoanalytic disavowal; I accuse you of doing what I am afraid I might be doing myself, what I very much so fear doing, what I don't want to do myself (Interestingly enough, this projection of the accusation of anti-Semitism onto 'others' mirrors the production of migrants in Germany as the prime carriers and transmitters of anti-Semitism). As members of a German society with a history of racial genocide and suppression of dissenting voices and bodies via extermination, perhaps it is worth thinking twice about the kinds of transnational academic feminist alliances that are rendered impossible when the accusation of anti-Semitism is used indiscriminately, and when used to censor, in the midst of predominantly white academics, a self-identified queer woman of colour, an international speaker for whom a different locational politics is absolutely necessary (and for whom accounting for the 'German context' is not exactly her job—otherwise, why bother to invite an international speaker who works in the field of American Studies in the first instance?)



What I have offered today is not anti-Semitic. I would argue that it is not even a critique of Israeli state practices per se. Rather, it is an analysis of how sexual politics and national politics are irreducibly intertwined with each other, and how this works in the particular case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As I have made clear in my work in *Terrorist Assemblages*, this is reflective of a neo-liberal phenomenon happening in many, many national locations; I am thus not 'picking' on Israel, as has been voiced by those who differ with me politically. I have not, contrary to the claims of the organising committee of this conference and in the interview with Professor von Braun, called Israel a totalitarian state. I will quote the relevant passage from the Guardian piece:

While Israel may blatantly disregard global outrage about its wartime activities, it nonetheless has deep stakes in projecting its image as a liberal society of tolerance, in particular homosexual tolerance. These two tendencies should not be seen as contradictory, rather constitutive of the very mechanisms by which a liberal democracy sanctions its own totalitarian regimes (Puar 2010a).

The fact that this passage keeps being misread as calling the Israeli state totalitarian is a classic symptom of this kind of projection. The difference between a totalitarian state and what Giorgio Agamben calls the 'state of exception' is precisely about the way in which liberal democracy and totalitarianism meet at a threshold to excuse liberal democracy from its own rule of law. Agamben has called the post 9–11 period in the United States, where the 'writ of habeas corpus' (that is, the right to a fair trial) was suspended for 'enemy combatants' despite being on US soil, legitimated in the name of a liberal democracy, the most extreme state of exception is US history (Agamben 2005). This is absolutely a different political formation than that of a totalitarian state.

From what I have observed in my limited experience in Germany, the crucial question facing progressives is, can a critique of anti-Muslim racism and a critique of anti-Semitism co-exist? Is it possible to articulate a critical, progressive stance against anti-Muslim racism without this positioning automatically reduced to being 'against Jews' or 'anti-Semitic'? If a particular 'anti-Deutsche position' is critical of the German state for its history of racial genocide during the Holocaust and understands German racism as exceptional, it makes little sense for this very same position to endorse the state practices of yet another, not only racist, but also, apartheid state.

For those of you who are committed to a critique of anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia, both here and globally, and yet do not see Israeli state oppression of the Palestinians as part of the production of that racism, that position—this fissuring—is simply untenable for any critical left politics in the United States that stands against US and other forms of imperialism. This is perhaps a locational distinction between the United States and Germany that cannot simply be dismissed as 'wrong'. I take the locational distinction seriously and without dismissal; I only ask that you do the same.



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