

Roundtable

ON PALESTINIAN STUDIES AND QUEER THEORY



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What is queer theory? Why is it important? What can it tell us about Palestine? What can Palestine add to the study of sexuality? These questions lie at the heart of the effort motivating this special issue. We sent these questions to a number of Palestinian and Arab scholars and activists. Their responses were varied and occasionally in tension with each other, reflecting the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants. We feature them here as the beginning of a discussion that we hope will further inform Palestinian academic and political work.

NADINE NABER: Theories that predominate in queer studies have prioritized a focus on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) visibility, rights, and identity politics. These theories tend to rely on universalist formulations of sexuality, and they obscure how sexuality is co-constituted with multiple axes of power, depending on the historical context. My work on Arab diasporas has benefited from queer of color critique's theorization of sexuality as a mode of racialized governmentality constituted by and constitutive of class, gender, and nation rather than as an identity. Queer of color critique also elucidates how U.S. imperial power operates through discourses about the sexual perversion of its subjects and the imposition of middle-class European concepts of heterosexual marriage, morality, and sexual propriety, including concepts of virile manhood, genteel femininity (and so on) as normative demands.¹

Queer native studies makes important interventions here, arguing that settler colonialism requires heteronormativity and the disciplining and regulation of Native sexualities through heterosexual desire for and the rape of Native women; the association of white men with heteronormativity and governance of the land, and of native men with homosexuality and the lack of ability to govern; and, the positioning of Native women's sexualities as non-reproductive/non-normative (in order to obliterate Native people).²

Overall, these theorizations have been useful for challenging simplistic colonial/racist ideas about the purported backwards sexuality or homophobia of people of color and the colonized. They illustrate, for instance, that anti-colonial concepts of sexuality are shaped by the very European structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy that they claim to resist. José Muñoz's theory of queer futurity is also essential here as it re-centers social actors performing "queer worlds" as a site of new possibilities, where the social reproduction of heterosexual normativity and its

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violences are interrupted and where we might “think about our lives and times differently” beyond the here, the now, and the normative.³

Queer of color critique and queer native studies can help us think through how Israeli settler colonialism requires Palestinian sexuality to be non-normative—savage, repressed, deviant—to legitimize concepts of Palestinian barbarism/Israeli civility, and to justify Israeli domination over Palestinian land. Consider Amal Amireh’s analysis of colonialist Israeli representations of Arafat and Palestinian men as queer.⁴ Also consider the Orientalist discourse about backwards Palestinian sexual norms at play when Israeli prison authorities threaten Palestinian women political prisoners that they will be raped in front of their fathers or brothers—as if this would be especially devastating for Palestinians—in order to force a false confession out of them.⁵

Queer studies also encourages a focus on how nationalist resistance against Israeli settler colonialism not only strengthens the demand for patriarchy but also for heteronormativity in Palestinian society—such as patterns of heteropatriarchal control over young women’s sexuality, in response to Israel’s sexualized torture of Palestinian women political prisoners. Importantly, such analyses might help elucidate how the pressure for heteronormativity justifies marginalization and violence against non-normative Palestinian sexualities. For instance, conventional Palestinian anti-colonial discourse renders sexual non-normativity a threat to the nation and LGBTQ Palestinians as deserving of punishment. As the organization alQaws has shown, by recruiting gay Palestinians as informants, Israeli settler colonialism reinforces this violence.

Overall, anti-racist and decolonial queer scholarship and activism can help clarify that just as homophobia and transphobia (both outcomes of nationalist demands for heteronormativity) will not liberate Palestine, “coming out of the closet” and fighting for a singular concept of “gay rights” will not liberate gender-nonconforming Palestinians. Indeed, Palestine studies has a great deal to contribute to how scholars and activists are envisioning decolonization beyond nationalism and heteronormativity while challenging the alliance between liberal LGBTQ activism and colonial discourses on indigenous sexualities.

SA’ED ATSHAN: Palestinian studies, and Middle Eastern studies more broadly, are not immune to the homophobia that is pervasive in the region and around the world. With few exceptions, LGBTQ Palestinians have been missing from scholarship on Palestine, mirroring the relative invisibility of these populations within Palestinian society. It is challenging to identify academics in this field who take seriously homophobia as a system of oppression, let alone take public positions in support of LGBTQ solidarity movements.

Based on my experience, in some cases, this silence stems from hostility toward queer people, and in other contexts, it is apathy. Yet in other instances, sympathy for queer struggles is internalized but not expressed out of concern for backlash such as a loss of social capital or access to networks in the region. Scholars and nonacademics alike justify the silence on homophobia by arguing that queer discursive and engaged projects in the Middle East result from Western imperialist epistemologies and/or that they are not priorities within a setting like Palestine.

Fortunately, a queer Palestinian social movement has emerged in Israel/Palestine over the past fifteen years. It started with queer feminist Palestinian women citizens of Israel. The subsequent rise of the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement, particularly with the increased

participation of diaspora Palestinians, largely accounts for the transnational nature of this activism. In addition to being catalyzed by queer diaspora Palestinians energized by the activism within Palestine referenced above, the movement was further propelled by the activism of non-Palestinian queers around the world engaged in combating pinkwashing—the Zionist state-led campaigns vaunting Israel’s LGBTQ rights record in order to detract attention from its violations of Palestinian human rights.

As a queer Palestinian myself who has been an activist in the movement, and as a scholar who has been conducting research in this domain, I have witnessed the emergence of a “Queer Palestine” sphere, with queer Palestinians increasingly carving out spaces for themselves in their ancestral homeland. Queer theory is important, and it can and should help us better understand such developments, although queer Palestinians outside the academy are also fully capable of theorizing their own lived realities. Ethnographic engagement among this community—both activists and nonactivists alike—can expose the epistemological work of queer Palestinians, in other words, to make meaning from their lived experience. Even more critical is the need for queer Palestinian voices to expand existing conceptual tools in queer studies and for that to inform and enrich Palestinian studies.

Documenting and supporting the struggles against Israeli settler colonialism are invaluable, as is the anti-pinkwashing activism that accompanies such efforts. We cannot privilege the critique of Zionism over the critique of Palestinian homophobia. Speaking against pinkwashing does not alone translate to queer solidarity. In fact, if the only time that one raises queer issues is in the context of undermining pinkwashing, one can actually help further homophobia by rendering queer subjects visible only in the context of a nefarious state-sanctioned discourse on LGBTQ people.

Queer Palestinians deserve to have our dignity affirmed on our own terms and to have the struggle against homophobia be named explicitly, even as it is being connected to other intersecting struggles. It is easy to reduce queer Palestinian subjectivity to the analytical domain of pinkwashing, lauding particular queer Palestinian voices as the only authoritative ones, and creating an archetype of the authentic queer Palestinian. Palestinian studies has much to gain from expanded dialogue with queer studies so that the heterogeneity of queer Palestinian experiences can be represented in our respective, and inextricably intertwined, fields.

NADIA AWAD: I think of colonialism as a totalizing effort—using violence, seduction, and invisibilization—to change how people make *meaning* in their lives. I am drawn to ways of thinking that show how this process manifests in our bodies and, to borrow from Native activists, in “all our relations.” One reason I gravitate toward queer theory produced by activists and cultural workers—INCITE!, Critical Resistance, Mariposas Sin Fronteras, to name a few—is that they strive to make the lives of queer people more bearable, vital, and expressible. Queer theory without this ethical commitment is a waste of precious environmental and psychic resources.

U.S. queer theory approaches empire in questionable ways. Some queer theorists obsess about global white gay communities’ need to see images of themselves represented in the church, the military, the police, and other reactionary institutions—as though whiteness’s loyalty to itself alone were new. While these theorists might explain Israel’s “transgender troop” tours, they cannot theorize how Arab American youth might oppose police partnerships at community

centers. Their agnosticism toward global technocratization lends itself to a fascination with virtual queer communities, but they cannot imagine a protocol for community spaces when infiltrating white men in the United States, United Kingdom, and Israel pose as Arab queers.

Then, there are theorists of the magical, the hidden, and the micro. They hope that the interior worlds of those who bear colonialism's indelible marks might usher in a new way of being or, at least, a less airless space for themselves. Such theorists write with Orientalist sentimentality about "other terms" for "nonheterosexual practices" and "identities." Yet, they fail to anticipate how, for diasporic/first generation Middle Eastern survivors, common language for family-based violence might be insufficient, slippery, or harmful. They search for hidden "subversion" and "rupture" within stubbornly patriarchal and misogynistic texts, but cannot imagine the importance of recognizing the different silences that occur in the Palestinian home—whether at the prospect of marriage or after someone has returned from detention or incarceration.

We must remember what we are up against. Palestinians, like many colonized communities, are not afforded the luxury of personal psychology. No traumatic event gives the Palestinian self the veneer of unassailability. For example, on the delegation of LGBT Americans to Palestine in 2012, a professor described an older Palestinian woman's Nakba story as "far too rehearsed." I suggested that the woman's sober, careful naming and dating of each violent event may be one of trauma's many traces. She replied, "Well, Israeli women don't do that."

In *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*, Dean Spade uses the term "life chances" to discuss the specific distribution of violence as it relates to transgender communities and those impacted by the prison system.⁶ The concept of "life chances" could be a powerful new analytical framework to examine Israel's ever-changing taxonomy of Palestinian "identities," insofar as these identities entail specific privileges and violences. Shifting the discussion from one of identities, including queerness, to a discussion of life chances may help generate new possibilities for transnational, intra-Palestinian community building.

The central message of the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective—*no one is disposable*—is, for me, a key to Palestine. I see Palestinians' historical insistence that our society must contain multitudes as a gesture toward this principle, and as a move away from sectarianism, along religious, nationalistic, or donor-induced lines. Our "return" is contingent on how closely we hold this key.

Palestinians have linked queer politics to decolonization—though, like prison abolition, this is an aspirational move. In spite of active and ubiquitous participation in the struggle, Palestinian women, in the imagination of many so-called leaders, are most valued when they are martyred, grieving, or symbolic. If this is the case for cisgender women, what is the role of a Palestinian trans woman in the struggle? Can we risk imagining it, even without funding? If we refuse to take up this question, what other questions are we refusing? What does this say about the Palestine we wish to return to?

MAYA MIKDASHI: To my mind the key questions are: what does queer theory look like from the vantage point of Palestine? In what ways might the study of Palestine challenge, inspire, and generate queer theory? These questions have been asked in relation to several bodies of critical theory including settler-colonial, postcolonial, and Marxist feminist theories, to name a few. The

recursive mode of this question underscores how the contributions of Palestine studies to past and present academic knowledge production must continue to be remembered, cited, and thought with.

There is a continuing divide between academic work that claims to speak the universal and academic work that is seen as particular.⁷ This divide is refracted racially, geographically, economically, and in gendered and imperial ways. The relationship between Palestine studies—and area studies more broadly—and queer theory conforms to this trend.⁸ Much research-based academic work that is embedded in the Middle East is understood to be primarily about the region, or the country/people/location itself—meaning that it is already framed as local in a way that much of what is recognized as “queer theory” is not, precisely because it has achieved the unmarked category of “theory.” These divisions are manifested and produced methodologically through the different emphases placed on language, archival, and fieldwork training within the fields of gender/sexuality studies and Middle East studies and its related disciplines (history, anthropology, sociology) more broadly.

In part, the purported universality of queer theory is achieved through a series of occluding moves: a disappearance of the research and context (mostly Euro-American, and mostly American), out of which queer theory emerges, precisely because some histories and contexts, some *bodies*, speak the universal;⁹ a disappearance of the structural, affective, and economic role that U.S. empire plays in the circulation of research and universalizing theory;¹⁰ and, the homonationalist positioning of the United States as the ideological (if not geographic) end point of the transnational journey of queer and sexual rights—the prehensive force of rights based on ideologically inflected narratives of “progress.”

To my mind, the study of Palestine helps generate and refine several ongoing and pressing conversations within queer theory: first, the relationship between sexuality studies and queer theory or, to put it differently, the place of “sex” and “sexuality” itself within queer theory; second, the relationship between post- and anti-colonial/anti-imperial theory and queer theory; third, the relationship between settler-colonial studies and queer theory; and lastly, the ways that a study of Palestine might lead to new openings and insights into theorizations of power, of race, and of indigeneity.

I find Jodi Byrd’s “transit of empire” incredibly useful as a concept when examining the relationship between the United States and Israel—both settler-colonial states that claim to be “on the right side of [queer] history”—and the ways we study that relationship. For Byrd, the “transit” of U.S. empire is both a displacement of “empire” to outside the borders of the United States (as opposed to a settler-colonial/imperial understanding of the country) and a medium through which the Native American is always a present and pressing figure in the overseas articulations of U.S. empire.¹¹ The Indian is always disappearing precisely because her disappearance, even when she is very much present, is framed as inevitable. She lives under the ideological sign and project of a relentlessly inevitable disappearance. With that in mind, it is useful to remember that the U.S. settlement project, the territorial integrity of the United States, was not complete until the twentieth century. The first organized form of Jewish immigration to Palestine, the *aliyah*, was contemporaneous with westward expansion, the Great Sioux War, and the Wounded Knee Massacre—to say nothing of the anti-black terror that dominated the United States in the Reconstruction era. Yet somehow these contemporaneous events and histories are projected to be

occurring in different eras,¹² and that is part of the power and project of the United States to always seem to be transcending its own historicity. Part of this achievement can be seen in the universalizing aspects of queer theory, namely its ability to be unencumbered by history.

If anything, the careful and ethical study of Palestine as a generator of queer theory, where the economic, political, and social imperial relationships are on clear display, may be a way to check that impulse. Part of this may be thinking through the intimacies and recursions of settler-colonial and anti-black praxis within transnational and diasporic discourses and practices of the Global War on Terrorism—a framework that both the U.S. and Israeli states have imposed (and succeeded at imposing) on the Palestinian national anti-colonial struggle. Here, a willingness to not assume that queer theory must primarily be interested in non-normative sexualities and genders is key.¹³ The Palestinian is an *ontological* problem for the settler-colonial project of Israel—“there are no innocents in Gaza,” as Israel’s minister of defense has said.¹⁴ It is worth wondering if for Avigdor Lieberman and by extension, the Israeli state, there are “innocent” Palestinians in the West Bank, in Jerusalem, or in diaspora—particularly if we understand “innocence” as a demand to cease *being* Palestinian, that is, to stop believing in and acting toward Palestinian self-determination (the procreative work of social reproduction). We must study the ways that *heterosexuality* and normative gender regimes can be framed as excessive, dangerous, and expendable in racialized settler-colonial contexts.

SOFIAN MERABET: As a field of study, queer theory not only interrogates a presumed stability of gender and sexual norms, but it also understands identity and its formations to be based on multiple and unstable positions that are subject to constant shifts and transformations. This unrelenting change of gears is also the hallmark of the Palestinian condition whose perpetual instability reflects an oppressive geopolitical situation, where coercion and subjugation are the tools of choice in the Israeli occupation of territories, minds, and bodies.

Oddly, the perversity of domination always comes with a malleable ideological edifice intended to legitimize power and supremacy, in which sexuality and its associations play a pivotal role. One of the latest iterations of Zionism’s ductility is its strategic embrace of queer sexuality, its cisgendered expressions notwithstanding. What makes this ductility viciously dangerous is its deceptive capacity to co-opt some dissident sexualities, imbue them with a racialized exclusive rightfulness, and set them against an illicit Other that is not only incapable of tolerating difference, but exhibits an “inherent” wrongheadedness that disqualifies it from the get-go.

What remains remarkable about the intricacies of pinkwashing is not just the efficacious homoerotic marketing of Israel across the globe—along with an almost equally effective representation of the purportedly intrinsic persecution of gays and lesbians in Palestine. Similarly significant is the bitter irony of uncritical adherence to the very logic of pinkwashing by some champions of queer theory, and this despite their shrewdness in virtually all other matters. When it comes to Israel and Palestine, the critique of the former can never be greater than the bashful support of the latter. After all, the lie of a “balanced view” comes with obligations!

Let me illustrate my point by giving the example of a particular incident, which leaves me pondering some of the disjointed perceptions and realities within the self-declared progressive field of queer studies when it comes to the subject of Palestine. The incident in question happened

in 2015 and had to do with an email sent out by the then cochair of the Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA) onto the section's listserv about "The AAA [American Anthropological Association] Task Force Report on Engagement with Israel/Palestine."

After an initial eight-hour silence, the following post appeared on the listserv, sent out by a State University of New York college professor:

The 130 page anti-Jewish diatribe fails to mention LGBT rights in Israel, Gaza, or the West Bank. Had it done so, it would have been forced to contrast the lack of any semblance of LGBT rights, and the relentless homophobia in Gaza and the West Bank, with the LGBT freedom and rights in Israel proper. Within Israel, there are gay bars, gay pride marches, etc., while none of this is allowed by Hamas in Gaza or even by the West Bank government. Just thought I would bring this to everyone's attention.

This email received an immediate critical response pointing to a "discursive tactic for which queer Palestinians have coined the term 'pinkwashing.'" Apart from a post by a graduate student about an interview he had conducted a few years earlier with the prominent Palestinian queer activist Haneen Maikay, less than half an hour elapsed before another email followed. This one was from one of the heavyweights of the early hour of U.S.-based queer scholarship and activism. In it, she wrote:

Despite my revulsion toward what Israeli policy has become [. . .] I don't think that AQA should take up this issue and I don't see the point other than to get moral superiority badges. It will be divisive, and *queers have little enough power without being splintered* [my emphasis]. In my opinion better to let this be worked out at the AAA level, where each and every AAA member has a voice and a vote.

Finally, the virtual conversation was stopped by the cochair the following noon. In a further email, she stated that:

I made a mistake in forwarding one account of the AAA Task Force Report on Israel/Palestine that represents the pro-BDS viewpoint. That was a not good way for an AQA chair to raise the issue of Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) or the Task Force report to AQA; the criticisms of my doing so are fair. My email should not be seen as any formal AQA stance, but a text one chair forwarded as an FYI. *This was definitely not a great way to launch this conversation in AQA* [my emphasis].

In my view, there is no better way to launch a meaningful conversation on a subject that some queer scholars mistakenly conceive of as not pertaining to their (otherwise) avowed feminist critique. When thinking about queer theory and Palestine, the apparently contradictory signifiers "queer" and "Palestine" concur in political content and consequence. Thus, a question imposes itself: How does the tension between relativism and stereotyping manifest itself ethnographically, in theory and practice, in a place such as Palestine and the wider Middle East? Moreover, if one includes the musings of queer scholars whose ethnographic knowledge on the ground is rather limited, but otherwise still forceful and authoritative, how can we expand on the subject of scholarly pinkwashing and convey the

reality that in exposing Israeli apartheid and racism, one is also up against those who, in other contexts, are champions of social and political justice?

DORGHAM ABUSALIM: There is no doubt that queer theory has come a long way since it first emerged in the 1990s. While its initial iteration occurred within the context of women's and gender studies, queer theory has since developed to encompass a wide range of intersecting topics, including gender, sexual identity, class, race, culture, nationalism, and religion, all constitutive elements of heteronormativity. Queer theory challenges the monolithic social structures and traditionalist identity roles that these elements inform.

Specifically, queer theory upends the definitional frameworks that have given primacy to heteronormativity and have marginalized, and indeed suppressed, deviations from a supposed norm. Therefore, the questions at hand can best be answered in terms of the pragmatic function and purpose of queer theory, which, in my view, is to ensure an honest and free expression of oneself, primarily in terms of gender roles and sexuality. Thus, the importance of the theory lies in its ability to unpack heteronormative binaries, without which free expression is impossible.

As an academic field, Palestinian studies can sometimes supplant Palestine as a lived experience. In the process, it inadvertently dilutes Palestinian agency, with Palestinians becoming abstracted objects of study. In that context, the framework of queer theory is a useful instrument to expose oppressive systems that create reductionist and binary perspectives on Palestine, and to highlight the narrative of Palestinians as a people seeking freedom across a broad spectrum of issues, not only concerning gender roles and sexual identity, but also political and civic freedoms.

A turning point in the development of queer theory took place during the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. By offering an intersectional approach to the epidemic, queer theory was influential in transforming the perception of HIV from a specifically homosexual medical condition to one that transcended sexual identity. Consequently, queer theory deconstructed the systemic frameworks that singled out and stigmatized gay communities by challenging the kind of stereotypes expressed in the view that the epidemic was a gay cancer. Queer theory can similarly illuminate the parallels of oppression and stigma that attach to the question of Palestine: by unpacking the stereotyping binaries that have long portrayed Palestinians as violent and hateful, it can highlight the humanity of Palestinians with much needed precision and nuance. Moreover, the framework of queer theory offers a bridge for the cross-liberation struggles already underway between Palestinian solidarity groups and others such as Black Lives Matter, allowing narrow identities to be transcended much in the same way that obtained during the early days of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

In addition, queer theory provides a space for local agency to thrive, especially concerning issues of gender roles and sexual identity. Examples of such agency include the gender-fluid music videos of Bashar Murad and the work of fashion designer Yasmeen Mjalli, whose designs specifically address sexual harassment on Palestinian streets. In this respect, Palestine offers a fertile field for studying the impact of prolonged conflict on gender roles and sexual identities, and how these manifest across generations who experience conflict differently.

NADA ELIA: As a U.S.-based diaspora Palestinian, I will limit my comments to those aspects of queer activism in the United States that I have been involved in. The activism that has brought us together,

in co-resistance rather than conflict, or even mere normalizing and coexistence, has been queer activism grounded in a radical understanding and rejection of nationalism as a form of institutionalized violence and exclusion. This is not to say all U.S.-based queers are allies, of course. But whereas many feminist allies still want to save Palestinians from themselves, blaming them for their own oppression, there is a vibrant queer analysis that understands that Zionism, which hinges on the supremacy of a particular group of people based on a socially and politically constructed identity, is irreconcilable with justice and equal rights for all.

The current situation in the homeland is unstable, untenable, and evolving, with many possible outcomes. The only positive one that I see is of a queer state, where various binaries and boundaries are dissolved. Palestine and Israel are not two separate and otherwise internally cohesive communities; they are multiple. Palestine is comprised of Palestinians who never left and continue to live as undesirable outsiders in their historic homeland; it is also comprised of Palestinians who live under occupation in the West Bank, and under occupation coupled with a genocidal blockade in the Gaza Strip; and yet more Palestinians who live in the diaspora. The diaspora itself is varied, from the squalor and cyclical massacres of refugee camps, to the relative privilege of First World upper-middle-class comfort. Israel is similarly not a homogeneous country. All talk of two states, even assuming such an outcome were possible—which I don't believe is the case—would be creating two apartheid states where there is now one, from the river to the sea. However, if we dissolve the divisions, the multiple false binaries, we can finally have justice. This may sound like strictly academic theory, but it can also be the most positive way forward.

About the Contributors

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Nada Elia teaches Arab American studies at Western Washington University, and is currently completing a book on solidarity politics.

ENDNOTES

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