



# Special Issue: Queering Palestine

## INTRODUCTION

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE explores what queer theory and activism can teach us about the Palestinian condition, and vice versa. To readers of this flagship publication accustomed to finding original articles that cover sociopolitical and economic history or provide in-depth analysis of international, regional, and domestic challenges to the Palestinian cause, looking at queer politics for insight may be jarring. Some might charge that it is irrelevant. Others may suggest that sexuality politics should remain a private concern and cannot speak to public matters. There are others still who might argue that queer theory is a form of Western discursive domination that jeopardizes the Palestinian struggle for self-determination.

These misconceptions themselves endanger the struggle for liberation, and this special volume tackles such dismissals. The three articles included here, as well as the roundtable discussion that follows them, examine the relevance of queer politics to the question of Palestine. They explore how queer theory, methods of inquiry, and political practice shed new light on Palestine and the Palestinians. They also highlight what the colonial condition that Palestinians continue to endure and resist can contribute to queer theory and practice.

In its exploration of the relationship between sexual politics, nationalism, and the work of decolonization, “Queering Palestine” unpacks the multiple intersections of queer politics and the Palestinian struggle. Both are concerned with the question of who gets to speak for, and define the meaning of, liberation. Queers are often perceived to be at the margin of politics and society, in Palestine and far beyond. Such positions of marginality are, in different ways, all too familiar to many Palestinians. Palestinian and queer forms of marginalization are enmeshed in complex ways. Israel’s colonial politics are reductive of both Palestinians and queers, and define their liberation as mutually exclusive. Zionist policies and discourses portray Palestinian aspirations for freedom as incompatible with queer rights and freedoms. This portrayal in turn attempts to justify the subjugation of Palestinians. At the same time, Palestinian nationalist discourses demand sexual conformity and regard LGBTQ rights as undermining Palestinian identity and unity. Palestinians must tackle these intersections. Silence is a refusal to confront a key instrument of colonial rule and nationalist injustice.

Both Palestine studies and queer theory are interested in exposing certain dynamics of domination and liberation. Palestinian studies tend to be dominated by historical and geopolitical analyses of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Scholarship has not attended enough to the *processes* of colonization and

decolonization, and to the disciplining of gender and sexuality inherent to colonialism and nationalism. Queer studies have not always been attuned to how sexuality can take shape as a colonial category co-constituted through multilayered structures of oppression. Scholars in both fields grapple with the phenomenon of nationalism and the role of the state in the politics of liberation. Putting these two fields in conversation reveals both intellectual and practical lessons.

The contributions that follow in this volume invite us to reconsider the Palestinian state-building project, a reconsideration that is all the more urgent as 2018 marks twenty-five years since the Oslo peace process began. This process has not only failed on delivering its promises of peace; it has in fact heightened and deepened both the occupation and the ongoing settler-colonial enterprise in Palestine.

## Queer Theory and Dissent

Queer theory emerged in the United States from a variety of quarters, both academic and activist, in the 1990s. As a scholarly endeavor, it grew out of gay and lesbian studies and the widespread intellectual adoption of Michel Foucault's work, especially *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*. Queer theory is also indebted to a long history of women of color feminism,<sup>1</sup> the so-called feminist Sex Wars of the 1980s,<sup>2</sup> and the radically sex-positive movement for universal health care, spearheaded by the advocacy group AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).<sup>3</sup> One of queer theory's main concerns is to interrogate the stability and normative status of any particular form of gender and sexuality. It seeks to undermine the hegemony and presumed naturalness of heterosexuality, and also to question the regimes of knowledge that uphold this naturalness. As C. Heike Schotten writes, such knowledge systems are "embedded within hierarchical and exploitative power relations that serve to justify, validate, and sanctify some lives (and forms of life) over others."

In her article in this volume, Schotten engages with Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine* to draw parallels between queer theory and the Palestinian cause. She points out that Zionist settler colonialism and heteronormativity are both violent and oppressive regimes of power and knowledge that seek to eliminate the existence of the Other.<sup>4</sup> She argues that queer praxis and the Palestinian struggle share three key features, albeit unwittingly. First, is the question of self-definition—in other words, who a Palestinian and/or queer is, and how being Palestinian and/or queer is at some level unacceptable or somehow deviant. Second, is what Schotten calls "a defining resistance to elimination." And, third, is a "commitment to unsettlement," that is, undermining "regimes of normalization," whereby the rebellious refuse to be incorporated into a hegemonic system that dictates what is acceptable. Schotten concludes that Palestinians, just like queers, cannot but be engaged in "decolonial praxis" since both are committed to resisting their negation. Resistance, in other words, becomes the only way to affirm presence and existence.

Said, among many others, has well demonstrated how the Palestinian struggle has been denied, and vilified as an illegitimate cause that needs to be eliminated or tamed. Resistance against elimination, which is central to queer politics, is evident in the Palestinian people's opposition to Zionism since the late nineteenth century. Palestinian men and women, queer and nonqueer,

continue to resist Zionist colonization of their land and their expulsion from it to the present day, through various political, legal, and cultural means. They persist in countering their demonization as religious fanatics incapable of peace, whose oppressed women need rescue from tyrannical (Islamic) patriarchal structures, and/or whose ostracized gay people require protection from their own homophobic society.

Still, many Palestinians would not necessarily share queer theory's "commitment to unsettlement," as Schotten puts it. Reviewing the Palestinian national struggle over the past fifty years, it is clear that the Palestinian national leadership has sought to "normalize" Palestinian existence and find a settlement (not an unsettlement) to the Palestine question since the late 1960s. The mainstream Palestinian political establishment considers the declaration of a Palestinian state in 1988, and its 2012 admission as a non-member state at the United Nations, as a great achievement. Even if it cannot provide just remedy to Palestinian suffering, such a state affirms the legitimacy of the Palestinian national struggle by "normalizing" it in an international system based on the sovereignty of nation-states. Although a number of political parties, social movements, and activists have challenged this mainstream political discourse, their dissenting voices are ignored. Moreover, the dissent itself has not always challenged the state paradigm, whether the call for dismantling the Palestinian Authority (PA) or reviving the demand for a one-state alternative. Queer politics allows us to bring dissenting voices back into the mainstream nationalist discourse of statehood and exposes the diversity of voices that claim Palestine and have a stake in its liberation.

## Sexuality Politics and the Nation-State

Queer theory seeks to undermine ubiquitous regimes of knowledge and the normalization they entail, at the level of the family, the state, and other sociopolitical institutions, including culture and religion. It inevitably questions notions of sovereignty and the state-centric approach to politics. It views the state, including the democratic liberal state, as a site of violence, hierarchy, and domination that strives to eliminate or co-opt dissent in the name of national unity and security. Such processes of elimination or co-optation are often gendered/sexed and racialized: in other words, they benefit certain groups rather than others, men rather than women, colonizers rather than the colonized, and/or whites rather than people of color.

This queer perspective expands Palestinian feminist critiques of patriarchy, and helps explain why, for example, Palestinian women's demands for gender equality in the 1970s and 1980s were pushed aside in favor of the Palestinian national liberation struggle. Time and again, the Palestinian leadership's nationalist discourse argued that the nation-state has to precede gender equality, and was thus a more urgent task. Yet the PA paid only (and occasional) lip service to gender equality. It ignored attempts by the Palestinian women's movement to reform Palestinian family law in the late 1990s, as well as its demands for democratic elections and accountable institutions.

Building on earlier Palestinian feminist critiques, the article by Walaa Alqaisiya shows how Palestinian nationalist discourse, in both its secular and Islamic iterations, is gendered in its portrayal of Palestine. That discourse still describes Palestine as the "raped" "motherland" whose

“sons” are tasked with freeing it from the shackles of male-gendered Zionist colonizers. This discourse excludes not only women and queers, but all those who do not share such an understanding of Palestine. The article also exposes how the PA continues to perpetuate the masculinist imagination of the state-building processes, one that emphasizes security, order, and policing, rather than inclusivity, democracy, and gender equality. Moreover, the PA has demonstrated its commitment to a neoliberal discourse of modernity and development that privileges middle-class Palestinians who are figured as neither gay nor female. According to Alqaisiya, such a discourse is incapable of addressing gendered colonial patterns of Zionist domination. It fails to offer a viable path toward decolonization since it oppresses political, sexual, and cultural diversity in Palestinian social life.

## Queerness as Decolonial Practice

Walaah Alqaisiya’s article draws on the work of alQaws, one of the most vocal queer grassroots groups in Palestine, to explain how queerness contributes to the struggle for Palestinian liberation today. The main argument, here, is that Palestinian queer politics, which emerged within the context of the Second Intifada, is inherently decolonial. It resists not only Zionism and Palestinian heteronormative discourses but also universalized notions of queer solidarity, which are confined to exclusionary gay, or single-issue, identity politics.

Alqaisiya reveals that the Palestinian queer movement defines itself in line with the principles of the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, which is explicitly agnostic on the type of state-centric “solution” to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. She also analyzes how Palestinian queer activists resist their exclusion from the Palestinian national discourse, and take part in the Palestinian struggle for liberation. These activists challenge Zionist colonialism and its salvation narrative that depicts Israel as gay-friendly and therefore justified in suppressing ostensibly homophobic Palestinian nationalism. These activists highlight and oppose Israel’s gendered and racist oppression of all Palestinians. Building on feminist practice and theory, Palestinian queer activists resist normative ideas of Palestinian liberation because these are patriarchal and fail to envision political and social liberation both individually and collectively, both inside and outside Palestine.

Just as central to Palestinian queers’ political engagement is their opposition to Western-dominated definitions of sexual liberation and widespread practices of exclusionary LGBTQ politics. Palestinian queers, for example, reject the universalization of “coming out” and insistence on public displays of sexual diversity as intrinsic to queer activism because this Western model denies Palestinians their context and tools. They are also critical of international aid and its gender-streaming approaches, and of human and LGBTQ rights’ discourses that claim to be apolitical. These discourses and structures, Alqaisiya explains, do not take into consideration the larger colonial context in which Palestinians, both queer and nonqueer, struggle.

Alqaisiya, along with some of the contributors to the roundtable, argue that the colonial reality of Palestine has thus something to offer to queer theory. They call for incorporating a deeper understanding of colonialism into queer analysis, specifically exposing how Zionist

colonial structures of domination impose heteronormativity to discipline Native realities and sexualities. In this regard, Palestinian anti-colonial queer critique adds to the emphasis that queers of color, and Native queers, place on the fact that sexuality is “co-constituted with multiple axes of power, depending on the historical context,” as Nadine Naber succinctly puts it in her contribution.

Mikki Stelder’s article in this volume elaborates further on these issues by analyzing the debate on “homonationalism” and “pinkwashing” that has overshadowed queer solidarity on Palestine since 2012. Homonationalism, a concept created by Jasbir Puar (a leading scholar in queer studies), challenges the relationship between sexuality politics and the state. It refers to the process by which states in the twenty-first century assert themselves by legalizing homosexuality, rather than denying or criminalizing it. Gay parades and LGBTQ rights, including same-sex marriage, thus become markers of a state’s credentials in terms of being civilized and democratic, just as “giving” women the right to vote was a marker of a state’s modernity in the twentieth century. In a related vein, pinkwashing refers to Israel’s use of gay rights to whitewash its ongoing abuses of Palestinian rights.

Anti-pinkwashing activism gained considerable momentum internationally and became a focus of queer solidarity activists around the world (especially in the West). However, Stelder argues, this activism was dampened by a vigorous public exchange on the pages of the e-zine *Jadaliyya* around the limits of these queer solidarity politics.<sup>5</sup> She also examines how the international queer solidarity movement attempted to impose on Palestinian queer activists language that was based in U.S. academic discourse in order for them to be heard. That language, she contends, does not adequately capture the settler-colonial reality that Palestinians endure and continue to fight against. It also does not adequately take into account Palestinian queers’ resistance to Zionist colonial structures of domination or their definition of Palestinian liberation.

One way to address this problem, as Stelder and several of the roundtable contributors suggest, is to attend to Palestinian anti-colonial queer critique. This entails questioning the discourse of modernity embedded in homonationalism and addressing the racialized and sexualized politics of Zionism, beyond its homonationalism, that are predicated on the erasure of the Palestinians. It also requires attending to how gender and sexuality can be tools of domination that shape, and are impacted by, changing patterns of colonialism.

In the final analysis, the question remains: Can nonqueer Palestinians, and non-Palestinian queers and nonqueers, hear the Palestinian queer anti-colonial critique? Queering Palestine does not offer simple answers. As a method of inquiry, queer theory enriches critical understandings of power and sexuality by questioning hegemonic discourses of salvation, solution, or settlement. As such, queerness is a decolonial practice that allows Palestinians and others to move beyond the reified notions of sovereignty, statehood, and identity that the Oslo process exemplified. It fosters an inclusive approach to politics that embraces multiple identities and ways of being. It allows for all Palestinians, both inside and outside Palestine, in refugee camps or in the diaspora, to have a voice and to reclaim their Palestine, and to imagine a future that affirms their presence and struggle for liberation and justice.

### About the Authors

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### ENDNOTES

- 1 For more on this topic, see Cherríe Lawrence Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981).
- 2 For more on this topic, see Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 3 See Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- 4 This term refers to a system that views heterosexuality as the only normal or natural sexuality.
- 5 See Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi, "Pinkwatching and Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and Its Discontents," *Jadaliyya*, 9 August 2012, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6774/pinkwatching-and-pinkwashing\\_interpenetration-and](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/6774/pinkwatching-and-pinkwashing_interpenetration-and); Heike Schotten and Haneen Maikay, "Queers Resisting Zionism: On Authority and Accountability beyond Homonationalism," *Jadaliyya*, 10 October 2012, [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7738/queers-resisting-zionism\\_on-authority-and-accounta](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7738/queers-resisting-zionism_on-authority-and-accounta).