



Guest Editor's Introduction: Queerness with Middle East Studies: Mapping out the Useful Intersections

Walaa Alqaisiya

To cite this article: Walaa Alqaisiya (2020) Guest Editor's Introduction: Queerness with Middle East Studies: Mapping out the Useful Intersections, Middle East Critique, 29:1, 3-7, DOI: [10.1080/19436149.2020.1717049](https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1717049)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1717049>



Published online: 17 Feb 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 1384



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

Guest Editor’s Introduction: Queerness with Middle East Studies: Mapping out the Useful Intersections

What does the interaction between Middle East Studies and queerness look like? What does it signify? And why, if at all, does heeding this connection matter for both Queer and Middle East studies? This special issue navigates these questions and poses many more to generate a productive engagement with the set of politics and theories that “Queering the Middle East” enables. For example, if we were to begin by contemplating the set of meanings that “Queering” generates, and then place them in interaction with the “Middle East,” we will have to start by accounting for numerous questions that pertain to spaces and times across which meaning-production takes place. The emergence of the term “queer” has an *official story*, a common narrative that grounds meanings encompassing a set of non-normative political identities, owing to the specificities of times, AIDS and the spatialities of reproducing and navigating Western capitalist modernity. The necessary task of locating the spatiotemporal origins instructing the will to name “the queer” as such and categorically to identify the subjects enfolded within its official story, is one of accounting for the web of power-knowledge, à la Foucault, through which a deconstructive, queering critique trumps “queer” as an identity signifier. Queering, a verb and a theoretical inquiry, therefore, speaks to the necessities of disciplinary “unsettlement rather than systematization.”¹ In other words, queering articulates the will to challenge the very terms through which it has been enabled, working against its own canonization and solidification within an official narrative and systematised origins. Queering’s failure to systematize the world does not collapse it to an investment in “irrelevance” as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner state, but rather “it means resistance to being an apparatus for falsely translating systematic and random violence into normal states, administrative problems, or minor constituencies.”² We could pause here to contemplate how queering of the Middle East becomes a necessary task through which a challenge to the field’s normative assumptions and systematising of violence, including through the hailing of the very term “Middle East,” takes place.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* posited this very resisting task onto the field’s Euro-centric and imperialist origins and paved the way for growing inquiries on how gender,

¹ Lauren Berlant & Michael Warner (1995), “What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?” in *PMLA*, 110, no. 3 (May), pp. 343–349, at p. 348.

² *Ibid.*

sexual cultural and racial difference map into one another within the production of orient “Otherness.”³ Western interventions in the Middle East within the geopolitics of war on terror, democratisation and humanitarianism is a manifestation of the continued deployment of these differences to further colonial and neo-imperial interests in the region. Sexuality is key in the production of such West/East binarism upon which rests the utilisation of the queer’s *official story*, as imagined and maintained within the West.⁴ One example of such utilisation to further geopolitical interests in the region can be found in the launching by US President Donald Trump’s administration, in February 2019, of global efforts to end the criminalisation of homosexuality.⁵ The campaign, led by the highest-profile openly gay person in the Trump administration, Ambassador Richard Grill, emerged amid efforts to mobilise European opinion and UN institutions against the Iranian regime, which, as Grill stated allows “barbaric public executions” and flogging to death of homosexuals.⁶ Countering such a narrative, Jasbir Puar⁷ has traced how the US embrace and promotion of sexually progressive multiculturalism is used to justify imperial wars in the ME (i.e., Iraq and now Iran). Her analysis further reveals the emergence of “homonationalist” subjects whose rise to collude with US national and imperial wars goes hand-in-hand with “orientalist constructions of Muslim male sexuality as excessively queer and dangerously premodern.”⁸ Under the slogan “LGBT rights are Human Rights,”⁹ Western-based narratives, on both the right and the liberal left spectrums, hegemonically circulate to generate a problematic hypervisibility of victimised queer Middle Eastern bodies.

In a similar vein, Fadi Salih in his article, “Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of The Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee,” investigates the emergence of the “suffering Syrian gay refugee” figure through the mechanics of the queer/humanitarian visibility paradigm in the aftermath of the Syrian crisis. Salih’s article posits the need to “go beyond notions of visibility that are strictly tied to the media and wedded to Western notions of humanitarian frameworks and visibility politics.” It suggests instead taking into account the ethnographies of “queer world-making practices outside and beyond” binaries of freedom/oppression instilled in the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee. For Salih, there remains “lot to learn from Syrian queer and trans* histories of being in public space, their everyday visibility on the streets,

³ See Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1984) “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” in *Boundary 2*, 12/13, pp. 333–358; Lila Abu Lughod (2013) *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); and Meyda Yegenoglu (1998) *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).

⁴ See further Joseph A. Massad (2007) *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press); and Jasbir K. Puar (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

⁵ See <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/trump-administration-launches-global-effort-end-criminalization-homosexuality-n973081>, accessed 1/13/2020.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

⁸ Jasbir Puar (2013) “Rethinking Homonationalism,” in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 45, pp. 336–339; Available online at: <http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=8904644&fileId=S002074381300007X>, accessed 24 August 2018.

⁹ US. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton used the statement in 2010 when addressing a reception at the State Department in Washington; see Elise Labott (2010), “Obama, Clinton vow to defend gay rights, adding “it’s not who we are as Americans” in *CNN News* [online]. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/06/22/gays.lesbians/>, accessed 24 Aug. 2018.

and the complex dynamics that characterize their interactions with society and the State.”

Indeed, what is elided in the narratives Gay Internationalists, such as those of Grill on Iranian homosexual oppression, is the complexity of living and navigating the various (im)possibilities of queerness in the region. It is precisely this task that Ladan Rahbari aims to achieve in her article, “Duffs and Puffs: Queer Fashion in Iranian Cyberspace,” where she examines the categories of “Duffs and Puffs” as examples of the online presence of queer fashionista in Iran. The article explores those categories in order to reveal “performances of fun, shock and failure” inscribed in a heterogeneity whose challenging of mainstream gender and sexual ideologies does not necessarily imply a rejection of modes of heteronormativity and/or modernity. Duffs and Puffs, for Rahbari, are an example of queer fashion in Iranian cyberspace that “offer aesthetic and embodied extravaganza that sometimes hyperbolically do and undo gender.”

This hailing of the suffering Syrian gay refugee by the web of humanitarian queer narratives in the region also resonates with the “truth regimes” that international humanitarian institutions, such as UNHCR, come to solidify in relation to True queer refugees versus Fake ones. In “Who is “Queerer” and Deserves Resettlement? Redefining “Deservingness of Refugee Status” and Resettlement: The Case of Queer Refugees in Turkey,” Mert Koçak investigates how the UNHCR plays a direct and active role not only in policing and controlling the sexuality and gender identity of queer refugees, but also in constructing deservingness of refugee status symptomatic of which is the proliferating discourses among refugees themselves of “fake LGBT refugees.” Koçak’s article draws our attention to the present regime of international refugee governance which, plagued by an ever increasing mechanisms of surveillance, travel bans and quota schemes, generates refugees’ mobilization of their “authentic” sexualities and gender identities as a resource for sanctioning deservingness of resettlement. The effect of such performance is a juxtaposing of such authenticity to the narratives of fake cases, which, as Koçak contends, reveals the construction of “deservingness of refugee status as a gendered performance of persecution.”

Middle East studies, as Saidian analytics proscribes, allows us to contemplate how a queering analytic in its commitment to resistance of systematized violence, is already in conversation with strands of Middle East theorising and critiquing of global hegemony in the region. At the same time, it signals to the productivity of acknowledging how the Middle East ought to instruct our thinking and engagement with queering critiques. This is especially true when engaging queering as de-normativising critique, whose very tenants of vagueness and indefinability¹⁰ risks reproducing the privilege of the powerful West. Thus, Middle East queering should draw our attention to the ways in which “the unacknowledged assumptions of white Eurocentric or North American identity that inhabit queer theory tend to travel with it, unannounced, defining the non-normative in pre-codified, imperialistic terms.”¹¹ In her article, “Different Normativity and Strategic Nomadic Marriages: Area Studies and Queer Theory,” Sabiha Allouche posits a wilful resistance to US imperialistic drives inscribing queer travels. Allouche’s piece draws upon personal experiences and narratives of homo-desiring men and

¹⁰ See further Nikki Sullivan (2003) *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press).

¹¹ Shamira A. Meghani & Humaira Saeed (2019) Postcolonial/sexuality, or, sexuality in “Other” contexts, in Introduction, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 55(3), pp. 293–307, at p. 295.

women in/from Lebanon, who perform hetero married life while pursuing same-sex desire elsewhere, in order to theorise “different normativity” and “nomadic unions,” accommodating the particularity of the “sex/gender systems” of global south societies. To opt for a conceptualisation of Strategic Nomadic Marriages (SNMs) contra “queer” is one of purposeful shying away from taking queer Western analytics as a given, thus, demonstrating the productivity of “thinking queer theory through the area of the Middle East.” Allouche contends that “SNMs emerge as a fluctuating and unsteady type of union that befits the ambiguity of the ‘sex/gender systems’ of global south societies,” compelling an analysis that “must prioritize a ‘sexual practice and gender performance’ framework instead of the more mainstreamed and universalising framework of ‘sexual orientation and gender identity.’”

Accommodating to the specificities of the global south, as advocated by Allouche, entails attending to the value of indigenous theorizing of “decolonial queering” as it emerges from the heart of the region, the settler colonial context of Palestine. In fact, the grounding of queerness within a decolonial lens as it emanates from the specificities of the “Zionist settler colonial project of hetero-conquest” allows us to contemplate not only the value of reading queer in relation to frames of indigenous and anti-colonial critiques¹² but also to weave the value of such an analytic onto Middle East area studies. Scholars on Palestine/Israel increasingly are emphasising the need to challenge the “piecemeal approach” designating ontological categories such as “post-conflict” or “state building” inscribing a disavowal of “larger structures of Israeli settler colonialism.”¹³ “Growing scholarly attention to the need “centres indigenous anti-colonial frameworks that reconnect intellectual analysis of settler colonial relations, with political engagements in the praxis of liberation and decolonisation”¹⁴ while at the same time calling upon us to contemplate the value of such analytics to Middle East area studies, especially within the current and increasing geopolitical normalisation of the Israeli state both at the regional¹⁵ and international levels.¹⁶

From here comes the value of charting the centrality of Palestine to conceptualising and advancing a decolonial queering theory as I argue in “Palestine and the Will to Theorise Decolonial Queering.” Such theorising “derives from the work of Palestinian feminist scholars whose gendered critique of Israeli-settler-colonialism informs the ways in which Palestinian native critique must respond not only to Zionist colonialism but also to analytical absences in the Western academy and within the Western left.” To situate decolonial queering, I argue, means to proceed from a proper contextualisation of the Zionist hetero-conquest system inscribing the structural continuity of settler-colonial politics of time, space and desire, hence the Palestinian *Nakba* as a structure not an event. At the same time, the process of situating decolonial queering

¹² Qwo-Li Driskill, Chris Finley, Brian Joseph Gilley, & Scott Lauria Morgenson (eds.) (2011) *Queer Indigenous Studies: Critical Interventions in Theory, Politics and Literature* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press).

¹³ Omar Jabary Salamanca, Mezna Qato, Kareem Rabie & Sobhi Samour (2012) Past is Present: Settler Colonialism in Palestine, in *Settler Colonial Studies*, 2(1), pp. 1–8, at p. 3.

¹⁴ Yara Hawari, Sharri Plonski & Elian Weizman (2019) Seeing Israel through Palestine: Knowledge production as anti-colonial praxis, in *Settler Colonial Studies*, 9(1), p. 155.

¹⁵ For example, the Saudi and Gulf monarchies’ normalisation of relations with the state of Israel.

¹⁶ For example, the US Trump administration’s abandonment of past US policies, such as not recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and of providing aid to Palestinian refugees from 1948 through UNRWA; the Trump administration also supports criminalizing the BDS movement on American college campuses.

is one of initiating native self-recognition that paves the way for a radical liberatory critique enfolding crucial questions on the mesh of intimate and geopolitical spheres.

WALAA ALQAI SIYA
London School of Economics, London, UK