Sexual Morality and State Projects:
How Can Queer Resistance Turn the Abject into Independence?

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From the occupation of Palestine to the war against Lebanon, through physical and emotional violence (see Natanel 2016), Israel creates disorder among the civilian populations it invades, and uses sexual morality as a tool of occupation. This essay explores how amid this chaos, invaded states too mobilise gender and sexuality (albeit to different ends). Pushed to create a united front against the enemy, heterosexuality is reproduced: gender binaries are solidified as women are called to reproduce the nation, and men to fight for their women and children (see Najmabadi 2005). This re-assertion of heteronormativity leads to the increased exclusion of non-normative subjects who do not fit inside strict either/or gender and sexuality binaries. I will theorise queer space in these contexts to establish how LGBT identities are co-opted for state projects, and to identify whether these subjects can use the idea of queer space to resist both local and occupying homophobia. In Palestine, I argue that while imagining queer space online can be posited as resistance, "checkpoints" offline mean that this "progress" does not translate to the "real" world.

Occupation Offline

The occupation of the Palestinian people by Israel creates a state of emergency. In times of national emergency, matters of war "or national liberation" take centre stage on the one hand, while on the other "issues" of sexism and homophobia are side-lined (Naber and Zaatari 2014). National liberation is shaped using explicit heteronormalizing techniques: through "state-led nationalist binaries" (ibid. 100), heterosexual family ideals work to unify the invaded nation against its enemy, further excluding non-conforming sexualities from the nuclear family (see Naber and Zaatari 2014). But the centrality of sexual morality to state projects is obscured because of its emergency status. In fact, the heteronormative national resistance mobilised by occupied Palestine is not a mere consequence of occupation, but rather a tool: by creating the chaos by which the invaded society is disrupted, the marginalisation of LGBT bodies produces Palestine as homophobic and backwards.

The "global" war on terror works to further espouse the idea that LGBT Arabs and Muslims are oppressed by their homophobic "culture" in order to legitimise "modernising" US and Israeli military violence (ibid. 95). Post 9/11, Arabs and Muslims have been scapegoated as "uncivilised terrorists" so that contemporary colonial powers can claim to be self-defending "peace, democracy and security" (ibid.). Central to the reduction of Arabs and Muslims to terrorists is a selective amnesia obscuring the historical conditions which led to the 9/11 attacks. This "us against them" binary depicts any opponents of Israel as anti-democratic and supporters of terror.

Through Israel's control of (homo)sexuality, binaries of a sexually "liberated West versus the oppressive East" (ibid. 92) are solidified. Israel can construct "good" Israeli gays versus "bad" Arab gays, allowing for its racist and Islamophobic imperialist project to be obscured under the veil of its apparent sexual morality. What is more, the "with us or against us" narrative espoused by Israel pits the Middle East as an eternal threat of terror. "In a constructed competition for 'priority'" (ibid. 94), East/West hierarchies serve to pit previously non-normative groups and identities against one another.

Not merely a symptom of conflict, the mobilisation of sexual morality ("good" normative citizens united against the enemy) by state projects is a vicarious tool of empire (see McClintock 1995). By creating the

conditions under which non-normative sexualities such as gay and trans people are further excluded from the states it invades, Israel is able to co-opt these displaced subjects in its colonising projects. According to Massad (2002: 362) the mission of the universal Gay International "to liberate Arab and Muslim 'gays and lesbians'" from their oppression transforms "practices of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual or gay." By advocating for gay rights, Israel appears as more civilised than the occupied territories, who appear as homophobic and therefore backwards (see Said 1978's Orientalism).

Mikdashi (2011), Puar (2013), and Ritchie (2014) have established how Israel reduces same-sex practitioners to their sexuality through pinkwashing, in order to universalise a "queer identity." With this in mind, I will zoom in to analyse the lives of LGBT subjects traversing these identities "on the ground" in Palestine. With the double pronged heteronormalisation of occupation by Israel using local homophobia to cast aside LGBT Palestinians as non-normative, and simultaneously co-opting them to support Israel's image as sexually liberated, I will ask how practices of (and stances against) pinkwashing play out on their lives.

According to Butler, (1993: 219) "it may be that [...] the failure of identification is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference." Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification reveals how these "abjects" can use their displaced positions to resist not only their intra-state oppression, but to call into question the rhetoric upholding Israel's place on the global stage as a civilised protector of global gay rights. From their exclusion by local homophobia, LGBTs in Palestine have "freedom" from fitting inside normative gender and sexuality categories, to resist not only local but also Israeli homophobia.

Muñoz (1999: 4) explores how subjects who have been excluded from "the phantasm of normative citizenship" have three options to survive within the majoritarian public sphere from which they have been excluded. Whether to assimilate and identify, to disidentify – recycling parts of the dominant culture to create a counter-public from which to resist – or to counter-identify and reject the dominant culture altogether depends on a multitude of factors, but such decisions are surely fore fronted in times of civil unrest. Using Muñoz's theory of disidentification, I will explore the options available to non-normative LGBT Palestinians – can they resist local homophobia without being co-opted into assimilating with Israel's civilising missions?

Reclaiming identity online?

Ira Tattleman is an architect and scholar whose work focuses on queer space as a constructed parallel world, filled with possibilities for intervening in "the world of dominant culture" (2000: 223-224). I apply his definition of queer space to interrogate Atraf (see Tattleman's Figure 1 for a selection of its clientele), an online dating platform frequented by both Israeli and Palestinian LGBTs under occupation. Mugo and Antonites (2014) advocate the use of online platforms (like the online dating platform used by LGBT Israelis and Palestinians) to create spaces for queer African women to resist from their imposed positions of shame as non-normative sexual beings, to create their own identities, and to self-narrate their histories. By disidentifying with their imposed non-normative identities, instead creating "fake" alternative Facebook profiles, these women can create online counter-publics, not only as safe spaces away from phobic

communities, but also where they can imagine queer and LGBT futures offline. In Palestine, Ritchie (2014) discusses the online dating platform Atraf as an opportunity for LGBT Palestinians who have been cast out not only by their communities in line with the increased heteronormalisation of occupation, but also as Arabs or Muslims in Israel.

To retain separation between Israelis and "others," the selection of suiters is controlled on Atraf. In the absence of physical papers to check (and keep these distinctions in check) in "real life," the cyberspace checkpoint is created, relying upon self-selected categories of religion. Within a hierarchy internal to Arabness which designates as most Arab and least desirable "non-Bedouin Muslims" (Kanaaneh 2009: 10), Palestinians wishing to date outside of this hierarchy need to disidentify with this category. However, while this act of disidentification (with religion and Arabness) may be imagined as liberating, as an opportunity for LGBT Palestinians to imagine queer and LGBT futures where they are not reduced to their "Arabness," it does not translate to liberation offline. LGBT Israelis "police" and reclaim even the online queer space as Israeli: "not relevant says Arab" shows how selecting the category "not relevant" points to an Arab identity, and therefore posits him as off-limit for Israeli Jews (Ritchie 2014: 625). Atraf is "a microcosm of queer Israeli space;" its selection process reflects that which "characterizes the corporeal, everyday experiences of queer Palestinians in Israel" (ibid.). These "checkpoints" are governed by the belief that allowing Palestinians into a space makes it less secure (Weizman 2007). Therefore, these creative imaginings (playing with identity categories at online checkpoints) remain imaginary, with little hope of transforming the Islamophobia and racism that Palestinians face at offline "checkpoints" (Weizman 2007), like in their encounters with bouncers at gay clubs in Israel (Ritchie 2014).

Not only lending weight to the "Gay International" idea that there is something specific and different about an LGBT identity, queer spaces are imagined as separate from "heterosexual" spaces. Ritchie (2014) reminds us that "queer" spaces are not immune from the "checkpoint" – the system that allows Israel sovereignty over all Palestinians inhabiting its space. In the same way that the Israeli government has enforced "checkpoints" to restrict movement by Palestinians since the 1967 six-day war (Weizman 2007), designating "queer" spaces (online and offline) works to regulate and further exclude same-sex practitioners from the majoritarian public sphere. As "good" gays, Israelis have access to these spaces and project a sexually liberated Israel to the outside world. But "bad" Palestinian gays are scapegoated as belonging to a backwards, homophobic "Middle East" (see Mikdashi 2011), therefore legitimising Israel's occupation of Palestine in the name of saving its gays (see also Spivak 1988's "white women saving brown women from brown men").

Rather than queer space transgressing "social, spiritual, and aesthetic locations" (Désert 1996: 20), "the contiguity of queer space and sovereign space" (Ritchie 2014: 625) is made clear on Atraf (online) and at gay clubs (offline). Muting Palestinianness or Arabness is therefore not a successful strategy for either assimilation with Israeliness or disidentification: the checkpoint is "constituted in the 'anticipation of violence'" (Jeganathan 2002: 360) because Arabness not only marks the parameters of desire but that of who counts as human (Ritchie 2014).

The strategy of the checkpoint, checking who counts as good or bad gays based on unchangeable aspects in real life, is merely a continuation of the limited mobility of LGBT Palestinians online and offline (ibid.). Because in Israel, LGBT equals Western or Israeli in light of Israel's outward projection as

liberated, Palestinianness is therefore rendered as incompatible with queerness. Queer bodies and spaces are no less regulated online than they are offline. To reveal the tolerance of queer spaces as an official myth (ibid.) is therefore the only way for Palestinians (queers) to resist and counter-identify with the true phobic Israel. Whether navigating queer spaces online or offline, the Arab Palestinian is "the eternal victim of an essence […] incapable of escaping his race" (Fanon 1986: 18, 26, 35, 67). Palestinians frequenting online queer spaces like Atraf can neither assimilate nor disidentify with queer spaces as strategies of survival because these spaces are Israeli.

Homonationalism describes a "historical shift marked by the entrance of (some) homosexual bodies as worthy of protection by nation-states" (Puar 2013: 337). While some Israeli gays are co-opted as "good" to be granted protection from homophobia to the extent that they are still Israeli, LGBT Palestinians are granted protection from neither Islamophobia nor racism. In fact, Israeli gays need "bad" Palestinian gays to achieve their status as "good" gays, their spaces "safe" from the former. The liberating potential of queer Israeli spaces lies precisely in this contradiction (Ritchie 2014). According to Ritchie (2014: 631), the realisation of an imagined queer space (where Palestinians are not "bad" gays) "would require nothing less than a total restructuring of social relations in Israel-Palestine." Therefore, at present, the centrality of sexual morality to Israel's occupation of Palestine means that online queer spaces serve as nothing other than a reminder of this fact.

The centrality of sexuality to state projects means non-normative sexuality has the imaginary/imaginable potential to pose a unique threat to Israeli occupation. As already outside of heteronormative familial ideals reinforced by "emergency" local homophobia, nonconformist sexual "identities" hold a unique opportunity for resistance. Since the sect and the family are intimately intertwined as patriarchal, heteronormative structures, many non-heterosexual Palestinian subjects pose a threat to the order of both institutions. In light of their already non-conforming status, cast outside of the realms of "normativity," and from a position of shame, these queer "abjects" could be in a unique position of power to resist both, and to unite against the wider hetero and homonormative powers of the occupiers. From their exclusion from the majoritarian public sphere, non-normative identities and LGBT activists can gain visibility and thus legitimacy to re-claim sexuality from state control, rather than merely espousing an additive universal "Gay International" (see Massad 2002) extension of (Western) human rights.

Muñoz's (1999) theory of disidentification allows that queer spaces, both online and offline, can be viewed as survival strategies to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere. By disidentifying, non-normative abjects can recycle negative stereotypes projected upon them to self-narrate their lives, self-create their identities. However, this phantom of hope is short-lived for Palestinians under Israeli occupation. In Israel-Palestine such spaces are "imagined" at best: online spaces cannot escape the totalitarian regimes which govern the "offline." When even the chance to "imagine" a queer future for themselves in which they would not be demonised for their religion (as terrorist threats) is granted neither by the Israeli state nor its moral police, disidentificatory resistance will lead them nowhere in a sphere that punishes them for being (or appearing) Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian.

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