



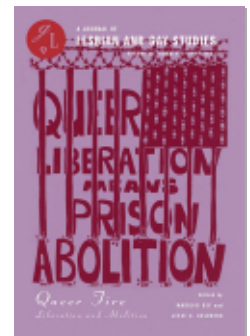
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Rehashed Liberalism, the Accusation of Radical Purity, and the Alibi of the "Personal"

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REHASHED LIBERALISM, THE ACCUSATION OF RADICAL PURITY, AND THE ALIBI OF THE "PERSONAL"

Neville Hoad

Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique

Sa'ed Atshan

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, xxii + 274 pp.

In five chapters, Sa'ed Atshan explores the question of queer Palestinian identities in complicated and contested local, national, and global frames. He argues in the first chapter that the queer Palestinian movement in Israel/Palestine "is mostly submerged and latent as a result of Israeli subjugation of Palestinians and Palestinian patriarchy and homophobia" (29), and through ethnography attempts to give

voice to the queer Palestinians he argues are excluded from NGO participation and media representations. Chapter 2, titled “Global Solidarity and the Politics of Pinkwashing,” elaborates “the split among queer Palestinian solidarity communities between those who name both Zionism and homophobia as systems of oppression that queer Palestinians face and those who prioritize Zionism and see recognition of homophobia as reinforcing a central feature of pinkwashing rhetoric” (75). How this split plays out in transnational activism and boycott politics from gay pride parades to the Boycott, Sanctions, Divestment (BDS) movement is the subject of the third chapter. The fourth chapter considers media and film representations in search of a space “for a multiplicity of voices that capture the heterogeneity of queer Palestinian experiences, subjectivities, and ideologies” (145). The final chapter “examines two theoretical frameworks elaborated by Western-based scholars—the gay international by Joseph Massad and homonationalism by Jasbir Puar—as they have been applied to the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement” to claim that these academic critiques have had “debilitating effects” on the Queer Palestine movement (185).

First, a note on method: in contrast to scholarly works on similar topics, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* is an unapologetic and unabashedly personal book. The author, who previously taught at Swarthmore College and is now an associate professor of anthropology at Emory University, presents himself as a native anthropologist, and the book is enlivened by many personal anecdotes. One, of course, cannot argue against someone’s personal experience and I won’t, but I can note the ways such experience is deployed to inoculate against critique. *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* is framed by an autoethnography in the tropes of a coming-out narrative: “During my last night at home that summer as I looked around into the caring eyes of my family members, I imagined them withdrawing their love for me if they discovered my secret. The thought of living in exile as a result of familial homophobia was too much to bear” (xi). The preface ends with the following sentence: “And although I certainly cannot speak for all queer Palestinians, I invite readers to join me in reflecting on my deeply personal journey” (xiv). While it is obviously not possible to cite one’s personal experience, it is standard academic practice to cite ethnographic interviews. Very frequently, however, ethnographic information appears in the book without citation and with minimal context: “panicked Facebook messages” from “Tamer,” “even more alarming messages” from “Salma.” Basil’s story stands entirely without explanation or reference (36–38). No citation appears for the following clinching claim: “As one queer Palestinian activist shared with me: ‘Massad’s criticism of our work is like a cloud that always hovers above me. How do I prove a negative? I

am tired” (189). Where, when, and how did that exchange take place? This lack of citations is endemic.

The book attempts to articulate the author’s personal history and anecdotes of conversations with the complex story of a shifting set of NGOs, cultural productions, global solidarities, funding flows, and boycotts that inter alia constitute the phenomena, historical experience, and social movements that could be held under the sign of “Queer Palestine.” The book argues throughout that Zionism and anti-Zionism join hands with Palestinian homophobia/patriarchy in the mildly tautological neologism of *ethnoheteronormativity* (the last three terms are largely used interchangeably) to stall the emergence of a queer Palestinian movement/subjectivity. This stalling is caused by what the book calls “the radical purists.” There is historical data in these accounts—despite the author’s startling refusal to cite Arabic language sources, beyond his inadequately cited ethnographic subjects—that could have led to an interesting and urgent analysis of sexuality and political agency under conditions of present neoliberalism.

Instead, across the chapters, a polemic emerges repeatedly. Strong and often unsubstantiated attacks on some leading anti-imperialist leftist scholars and the activist organization Al-Qaws are made throughout because they are “the radical purists.” The definition of the term *radical purist* is often vague, even as it appears on nearly a quarter of the book’s pages, but here is the charge: “The political currents of radical purism have subsequently helped transform the critique of empire into an ‘empire of critique’ in which queer Palestinians . . . find themselves under numerous overlapping regimes of surveillance, suspicion and control” (13). Initially, this rhetorical sleight of hand—the transforming of “the critique of empire” into “the empire of critique”—reveals a serious confusion around matters of scale and power: academic critiques of Zionism become equivalent to the violences of settler-colonialism, the analytic purchase of terms like the *Gay International*, *homonationalism*, or *pinkwashing* as detrimental to the interests and well-being of queer Palestinians as Zionism and/or the homophobia/patriarchy/ethnoheteronormativity ensemble.

Then, this conjuring and targeting of “an empire of critique” through the accusation of radical purism becomes analogous to something like red-baiting, especially since the scholars the US-based Atshan makes exemplary of his phantasmatic empire of critique, the “Western-based” Joseph Massad and Jasbir Puar, most notably, have themselves already been subjected to a number of smear campaigns, personal and professional attacks by a range of political and institutional actors not exactly on the side of queers or Palestinians. That this “empire of critique” is characterized by the trope of “radical purism” makes those designa-

tions symptomatic of the book's moment of writing in the wider US political context. Accusations of "radical purism" come straight from the playbook of liberal/centrist/reformist establishments—think the DNC on Bernie Sanders—and the invocation of this pragmatist shibboleth is entirely congruent with the general thrust of *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique*. Ultimately, what the book offers in the language of tolerance, multiplicity, and heterogeneity is a return to the kinds of sexual liberalism that Massad and Puar and others have already critiqued. Yet, the book wants to claim that such a fallback into sexual liberalism would be an advance on those scholars' positions.

These bad professors build their "empire of critique" through what Atshan terms *discursive disenfranchisement*. Strong disagreement is reframed as silencing. Why should the rigorous attempt to ensure that the study and building of minoritarian and third world sexuality and gender movements is not simply *personal*—and the demand that scholars and activists take seriously questions of imperial power, the extractive political economies of racial capitalism, and the material constraints and conditions of agency—be experienced as paralyzing, let alone disenfranchising?

Of course, no critic is above criticism, and the domains of activism and scholarship are not coterminous, but Atshan's reading habits are similar to his citational ones in relation to those he wishes to criticize. He tends to paraphrase and cherry-pick his interlocutors to make them say what he wants them to say. For example, Atshan wants to accuse Massad of essentialism, so he accuses him of producing an "authentic" Arab sexuality (194). *Authentic* is not a word that appears either in the 2002 *Public Culture* Massad essay ("Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World") nominally under discussion here, or in the expanded version of that essay in *Desiring Arabs* (2007), or in *Islam in Liberalism* (2015), and Massad's work generally abjures the culturalist and empiricist logics underpinning any idea of authenticity. It's not there; it can only be imputed. And then there is this extraordinary sentence: "Massad does not recognize how international aid in Israel/Palestine, as my own forthcoming research has revealed, can both facilitate Israeli settler-colonial processes and provide Palestinians with tools to resist those processes" (190). Forthcoming research has of yet revealed nothing, because it is still forthcoming, and if it is actually forthcoming, a citation would be useful. Moreover, if you already know what the findings will be, the research starts looking like confirmation bias. These kinds of rushed and incoherent claims indicate to this reviewer more of a desire to besmirch, discredit, and dismiss one's interlocutors than an attempt at serious scholarly engagement with them.

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