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COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Warfare, Death, and Queer Theory in the Global South

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"Queer Theory and Permanent War," by Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir K. Puar. GLQ 22.2 (2016).

"Can queer theory be recognizable as such when it emerges from elsewhere?" (Mikdashi and Puar 2016: 215). Queer theory's encounter with the lives of marginalized peoples in the Middle East and Africa provides urgent answers to this question. New technologies of warfare have led to the possibility that entire villages might be suddenly eliminated at the press of a button in a Western military facility; at the risk of laboring the obvious, these individuals have no access to the kinds of "future" often conceived in Western neoliberal culture. "Collateral damage" is becoming an increasingly important term for scholars and activists who want to draw on perspectives from queer theory to analyze these new forms of remotely controlled death. But how did queer theory enter into a scenario that might more typically be thought of as belonging to security or area studies?

As Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar reveal, queer theory is intimately implicated in this landscape of "permanent" and asymmetrical warfare. Queer subjects in this context are not simply individuals who experience same-sex desire but all those who, regardless of sexual identity, are placed in a queer relation to neoliberal conceptions of death, life, and futurity. It is therefore no accident that Mikdashi and Puar's subject matter deliberately parts company with queer theorists' favored focus on visible queer communities, texts, and activism. They deliberately emphasize the ways in which queer theory forces us to confront stigmatized and marginal forms of life without focusing on sexual identities that might be either unavailable or unattractive to those in non-Western cultures. We might also think of what this emerging queer theory tells Western readers about the prisons, homeless shelters,

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and working-class communities of their own supposedly "developed" neoliberal societies. Eschewing an easy focus on what they term "queer theory's general obsession [with] . . . the sexualized human form" (ibid.: 221), they instead draw our attention to precarious forms of life that exist at the margins of policymaking, media coverage, and activism in Washington, Paris, and London. They specifically avoid any easy attempt to universalize Western categories such as sexuality and LGBTQ rights, and instead show how queer theory can explore the lives of Afghani or Iraqi war veterans; they remain critical of the "homonationalism" or "queer imperialism" of millennial gay rights discourses, with their attendant devaluation of queer subjects who persist in forms of religious, linguistic, or cultural identification that fail to respect neoliberal projects of sexual self-determination.

If we accept a long-standing tendency within queer theory to position the "queer" as being disruptive, antinormative, and subversive to prevalent discourses of sexuality and biopolitics, then we find much provocative material in Mikdashi and Puar's article, as well as in Puar's (2007) earlier work on terrorism and the body. What has held queer theory back from this encounter? Too often, as the authors observe, queer theorists have simply been unwilling to accept that queer theory could address the experiences of a disabled war veteran in Kabul or a transgender prostitute in Bagdad. Put bluntly, "white, cisgendered, masculinist and middle-class queer histories" have tended to constitute the archive of queer theory. Other lives, Puar and Mikdashi contend, have been judged as somehow unworthy of queer theorists' attention. The Academy, as much as the military or NGOs, appears to consider such lives as being illegible and "collateral"; at best, they have been consigned to a different disciplinary framework, most often sexuality or area studies.

Mikdashi and Puar's 2016 article reminds us that this situation is untenable. Both scholars have made these arguments before, and similar critiques of queer theory have existed for years, but the 2016 article, itself a report on a roundtable on queer theory and area studies, coincides with a gathering momentum within queer and transgender studies (Mikdashi 2013: 351). It makes a concise, simple, and compelling case for queer theory to deprovincialize itself and move outside the West (Whab 2016: 707; Smith 2013: 180). This argument has been taken up in other work that has drawn explicitly on Achille Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics" to theorize the troubling forms of expendable life apparent throughout the South. Mbembe's term describes the hegemonic deployment of death as a form of sovereignty or "the subjugation of life to the power of death;" in a nightmare mirror image of Michel Foucault's argument about the use of life as a form of governance, necropolitics has reshaped our understanding of queer relationships

with death, previously a subject of psychoanalytic theory (Bersani 2009; Mbembe 2003: 11–12, 39). Queer and transgender theories have played a vital role in this project and transformed our understanding of these collateral populations who face death and preciousness on a daily basis (Lamble 2013; Snorton and Haritaworn 2013).

Partly in the light of Puar's work, Jin Haritaworn (Haritaworn et al. 2015) has argued for a distinctive "queer necropolitics" that reveals how forms of life that are deemed worthwhile are sharply divided from those that are consigned to the garbage heap, as disposable and worthless. In an argument that recalls Judith Butler's theorization of "precarious life" in post-9/11 America, we might consider the contrast between the wealthy, white gay and lesbian couples imagined in neoliberal advertising campaigns aimed at the "pink pound," and an incarcerated transgender subject seeking urgent surgical interventions (Butler 2006). In a 2015 volume, Haritaworn and others (2015) have shown how working-class and marginal queers have repeatedly been marked by death as a form of social control. Like Puar's studies of maimed and collateral populations, necropolitics reveals those who are not yet dead, their lives neglected and subject to the chance drone strike, the possible drive-by shooting, or a malfunctioning batch of fake black-market pharmaceuticals; in other words, the living dead. Mikdashi and Puar contend that following the lengthy US war in Afghanistan, the country was left with the world's highest population of individuals relying on prosthetic body parts, often without adequate aftercare and support. The authors deliberately use the term *crippled* to distinguish between those who have received medical care and identification as *disabled*, and those simply left to live without any limb; Puar (2017) has recently advanced her theorization of physical impairment in this context.

These are the lives of queer and collateral subjects; their deaths are as yet unrealized, but they are always already sanctioned. Deprived of legal protection, one thinks of villagers subjected to drone strikes, collateral subjects can die at any time. These queer life stories run at odds with core assumptions within Western LGBTQ rights discourses; they are deprived of the self-realization deemed integral to the emergence of a sexual subject. Queer forms of living death marked by permanent war clearly preclude the possibility of middle-class self-discovery. The mobilization of living death, as evinced separately in the work of Mbembe and Haritaworn, is in itself of considerable interest to queer theorists, who have long been concerned with the politics of life, reproduction, and futurity (Edelman 2004). To live without the privilege of a future, or to have children who are not privileged as the bearers of futurity, are conditions that must develop queer theory's otherwise sophisticated accounts of biopolitics and reproduction.

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Queer theory from elsewhere challenges a certain stagnation within metropolitan queer theory, or what Mikdashi and Puar (2016: 215) term "queer theory as American studies"; forms of life and death in the South speak far more closely to the interests of earlier queer theorists than contemporary middle-class queer life in the West. Yet this point must remain secondary; queer theory from elsewhere should not be judged on what it offers "to" its Western counterpart. Work at the intersection of queer theory and area studies needs primarily to engage closely with the specificity of non-Western cultures, histories, and languages; there is a continual danger of becoming subsumed into a generalized notion of "world sexualities." But given these caveats, interventions such as Mikdashi and Puar's force queer theory out into the world; they anticipate a traveling queer theory able to engage with non-Western places and peoples, whether in Kabul, Beirut, Kinshasa, or Lagos. This deprovincialized queer theory has the potential to generate a type of reverse ethnography through which Western readers can appreciate their own domestic practices of exclusion, particularly in the prison and health care systems, through newly critical eyes.

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