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Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala (Eds.) (2015)

The global trajectories of queerness: Re-thinking same-sex politics in the Global South

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The global trajectories of queerness: Re-thinking same-sex politics in the Global South

Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala's collection of essays maps the circulation of the term 'queer' by outlining how same-sex intimacies and sexual politics from and of the Global South are theorised and entangled in processes of globalisation. The fifteen essays investigate if the societies of the Global South merely appropriate and propagate 'an internationalist (read Euro-US) language of LGBT/queer rights and identity politics, whether it is imposed on them or whether there is a productive negotiation of that language' (p. 19). Tellis and Bala offer a profound critique of theoretical frameworks in which same-sex discourses in the Southern Hemisphere are uncritically envisioned within a global 'queer' internationalist language, without discussing the term's political, economic, and cultural underpinnings. It argues for a particular specificity when it comes to scholarly work on local expressions of same-sex desire, although refraining from nativist and cultural relativism rhetorics.

The introductory chapter provides a refreshing and critical reading of earlier and more recent scholarly work on the question of globalisation and same-sex cultures in the Global South (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002; Altman, 1996; Aggleton et al., 2012; Wieringa & Sivori, 2013). Within these frameworks, Tellis and Bala argue, a series of problematic binaries usually lay out the fundamental components of the field of same-sex desire. First, there is a problematic binarism between 'tradition'; pre-modern, pre-colonial same-sex practices; and 'modernity', i.e. Western style identity politics (Altman, 1996), thus perpetuating a common racialised and imperialist understanding of sexuality. They single out Altman as he designates the native as unable to have an identity, only practices, whereas the 'modern' Western citizen has an identity. Second, Tellis and Bala make the crucial point that the opposition between commodification and politics (Cruz-Malave &

Manalansan, 2002) is an artificial binarism. Namely, can politics be completely situated outside the domain of commodification? Moreover, is queer intervention completely safeguarded from being commodified? Third, they observe a binary in recent writings between dispossession and empowerment (Cruz-Malave & Manalansan, 2002), while the editors agree that queer politics in many southern localities have proven that what empowers can dispossess. Fourth, there is a binary between home and diasporas, as if the two can simplistically be put in complete opposition. 'As if queer North American and Western European politics were also not tied up with nationalist projects and as if the diaspora's "queernesses" were not always already contaminated by Euro-US queer politics' (pp. 16-17). Fifth, there is a binary between nationalisms and global economy; although can, as the editors contend, nationalisms be entirely separated by global economy within a world where there is a constant negation and trade of goods, people, information, knowledge, and images? And, lastly, there is a binary between globalisation and subjectivity where queer subjectivity is often merged and confused with queer critique, i.e. counter-hegemonic, while some 'queers' in the Global South appear to 'dovetail quite comfortably and disturbingly with the hegemonic' (p. 17).

Through writings of and interviews with scholars, activists, and artists from Bolivia, India, China, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Iran, Trinidad, Taiwan, as well as Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, The Gambia, and Thailand, the book maps the uneven, ambivalent, and contradictory trajectories of the term 'queer', from its appropriation in the streets of New York in the 90s to its travel towards many countries in the Global South. The volume is insightful as it discloses mostly country- or site-specific studies of same-sex sexualities and also offers a profound and fundamental critique of the 'West' as a geopolitical knowledge formation. It addresses sexual citizenship and identity that are wrongly seen as new to the Global South (c.f. Wieringa & Sivori, 2013, p. 16); the editors argue that they are not 'modern' concepts that have been 'introduced' from the West. Moreover, it critiques the idea of the sexual subject in the Global South that is frequently referred to and resituated in the singular, as if sexuality were a cohesive matter. The essays in this anthology can be read out of sequence without reference to other essays in the book. The editors refrained from dividing the book into sections which makes the book harder to read selectively, depending on your primary interest. A geographical or thematic grouping of the essays would have given the book a more focused feel. Readers are likely to ask how the chapters interlink besides the focus on the Southern Hemisphere and why some countries and sites were chosen and others omitted. Although the book does not offer a clear justification for the selection of themes and countries, the strong individual essays and the introductory chapter offer a comprehensive and informative exploration of particular local expressions of same-sex desire and subjectivity.

The first chapter by Neville Hoad focuses on the intersection of queer theory and transnationalism in order to ask the question: 'Could there have been a queer theory of, from, and for the global South?' (p. 29). He understands the relationship between queer theory and transnationalism as an ambivalent type of pharmakon — which means both medicine and poison. On the one hand, global capitalist relations of production, which have a strong relationship with the concept of queer (Warner, 1993), homogenise the sexual and identitarian life and experience of its subjects. And on the other hand, queer theory, through its impact on transnational policy and human rights discourses, engages and challenges a range of specific issues such as heteronormativity and patriarchy in their particular places and times. Readers who are familiar with Roderick Ferguson's memorable work *Aberrations in black: Toward a queer of color critique* will especially enjoy his chapter in the book. *Aberrations in black* describes a complex relation between liberalism and historical materialism and how these issues have placed gender and sexual normativity as essential to social transformation. In this book under review, Ferguson rereads *Aberrations in black* to contend that the queer of colour critique does not represent the exporting of 'queerness' to the Global South, but rather demonstrates how the concept of queerness can be used as an analytical tool to engage with the knowledge of and from the Global South.

A majority of the chapters of the book follows this particular methodology, thus utilising queerness as an analytical tool to research same-sex politics within a specific geographical location under the conditions of global governance. Haneen Maikey and Mikki Stelder analyse the need to disregard single-issue LGBT identity politics (visibility, pride, coming out, and gay rights) as principal frameworks inflicted on Palestinian queers to understand their struggle. They interestingly employ the term 'queer' in opposition to the authority of Western LGBT movements, to the Palestinian patriarchal culture and the involvement of the Israeli LGBT movements and 'Pinkwashing' campaign with a Zionist ideology and its occupation of the Palestinian territories. The use of the term 'queer' as they employ it, 'is both a reflection on its commodification, [...] a form of reading [...] that reveals the ways in which frames of sexual rights and sexual solidarity have folded LGBT subjects into the state, and colonial and imperial violence, and as a praxis that brings to the surface [...] what was rendered unintelligible' (p. 100).

Equally interesting are the essay by Josephine Ho and the interview of activist Wei Tingting. In her essay, Ho describes how Taiwanese gay rights movements and AIDS-related prevention programmes impose Western ideas of 'civility' and 'modernity', which in turn not only mainstream and normalise same-sex sexualities, but create a set of regulation and censorship that propagates 'respectable' and 'decent' citizens. Thus, the desire of south-eastern countries for modernity and civility has now developed into new civic customs and values that govern people's

lives down to the tiniest details, 'hence blurring the public/private divide that used to stop state surveillance of people's lives and relationships at the door' (p. 132). Queerness then, she argues, can be a mechanism for disputing the hegemony of respectability and decency now created by global governance by locating the concept's local genealogy and taking into account the structural inequality in which the Global South is situated. But what constitutes 'queerness' in Taiwan if the concept was phonetically translated as *ku'er* in Chinese (literally 'cool kid'), as the interview of Chinese activist Tingting and the essay by Ho show, and coincides with the introduction of a popular Coca-Cola beverage *Qoo* (transliteration *ku'er*) in Asia? How does the visibility of queer goes in tandem with its closeness to the commodity? Can a 'queer' movement be critical of the existing *tonghzi* (homosexual) movement without jeopardising the hard-fought and won battles of the LGBT movement? As Tingting explains the 'born as gay argument', which was the main strategy of the LGBT movement to counter homophobia, stands in stark contrast with the sexual fluidity of queerness. And lastly, what is the valence of 'queer' as the circulation of the concept is limited or not understood by the ordinary people? Arguably, the only valence of queerness in this context might be to differentiate the LBT community, as Tingting argues, from the mainstream gay movement as the term *tonghzi* in some context is read as 'gay men' thus dismissing lesbians, bisexuals, and transsexuals/transgenders.

Witchayanee Ocha's essay addresses the question of labour in the trajectories of queer in the Global South, which strangely enough, has not been touched upon in such depth and rigidity in the contributions of this book. She explores the connection between the sex and medical tourism industries in Thailand and sketches the development of a variety of gender identities dictated by the aesthetic and sexual norms of the market under the sign of neoliberal globalisation. The chapter by Krystal Nandini Ghisyawan shows a comprehensive literature overview of same-sex discourses in the Caribbean, but does not provide much added value in this field. The ethnographic study of 35 women in Trinidad remains anecdotal and descriptive and fails to ponder questions of tenable interest. The essay by Julieta Paredes is problematic in many ways. While Paredes interestingly analyses colonisation as a violent and phallogocentric penetration (penetration as an act of injecting one particle into another, and colonisation as the intrusion and rule of territory), she sees trans identities as an 'attempt to destroy the historical and political identity of women', since 'there are male bodies that call themselves trans and they end up saying that they are women or that they can be women' (p. 234). She continues that 'those who identify as trans do not have a politics, it is not an identity, it is mere make-up' (p. 234). In essays such as these, you would have liked the editors to have a more rigorous and prominent role in facilitating a coherent discussion between the essays. Nevertheless, this rich and thought-pro-

voking collection is a welcome and well-timed extension to recent studies of same-sex sexualities and current developments in same-sex discourses within the Global South.

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