

Turkey's queer times: epistemic challenges

Evren Savcı

Abstract

This article suggests that Turkey's queer times are co-constitutive with Jasbir Puar's queer times of homonationalism. If the queer times of homonationalism correspond to a folding of some queers into life and respectability at the cost of rising Islamophobia in the "West," Turkey's queer times witnessed the increasing marginalization and "queering" of variously respectable subjects in the name of Islam and strong LGBT organizing against such marginalization. It discusses the epistemic challenges of studying Turkey's queer times that stem from a theoretical suspicion that "queer" operates as a tool of colonial modernity when it spreads to the "non-West," a suspicion that is due both to a perception of Islam as a target and victim of Western neocolonialism and to an ahistorical and rigidly discursive understanding of language. In turn, scholarship on Turkey's queer times has the potential to truly transnationalize queer studies, both getting us out of the binaries of global–local, colonial–authentic, and West–East and reminding scholars that hegemonies are scattered.

Keywords: *Islam; Queer; Neoliberalism; Translation; Turkey*

When discussing Turkey's queer times, as this special issue sets out to do, we must inevitably confront the question of whether "queer," as a "Western" intellectual and political term, may have neocolonial functions within non-United States/non-western European contexts. In this article I reflect on the burdens and challenges of studying LGBT and queer issues in Turkey that result from that question. In particular, I ask, what *epistemological* challenges stand in our way when we seek to make sense of Turkey's queer times?

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My use of the term “Turkey’s queer times” is inspired by the call for papers for the conference that initiated this special issue: LGBT¹ organizing has proliferated in Turkey alongside a growth of social conservatism, authoritarianism, and neo-liberalism in the last two decades. “Turkey’s queer times” indexes both the expansion of a feminist and queer politics of sexuality and the body during this period and the queerness of the rise of the morality politics such movements organized against. It is this second meaning of “Turkey’s queer times,” the rise of a particular morality politics under the Justice and Development Party’s (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) neoliberal Islam, that responds to and complicates current approaches to LGBT politics in Euro-America and especially the United States.

In this discussion I particularly consider Jasbir Puar’s² seminal *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, in which the author diagnosed a particular turn in queer politics in the United States and the UK. These “queer times,” Puar suggested, witnessed a stark shift from a system that left queers out of national agendas altogether to one in which nations are ranked according to their degree of “homofriendliness,” which is understood to correspond with their levels of democracy and civilization. She asserts that the “mis-treatment” of gays and lesbians in the so-called Muslim world is employed as an excuse to position the war against Muslim terrorism as simultaneously a war for and of gays and lesbians. For example, Israeli pinkwashing, where Israel’s human rights violations against Palestinians are concealed by the use of its “progressive” position on gay and lesbian rights, relies on and perpetuates this logic. Homonationalist logic posits Tel Aviv as a “gay mecca” and Israel as “the only democracy in the Middle East,” exemplifying how “gay rights” can cover for racial settler-colonial projects. Rejecting the suggestion that all queers always fall outside reproductive nationalisms and therefore outside the investments of biopolitics, Puar asks, “How do queers reproduce life, and which queers are folded into life? [. . .] Does this securitization of queers entail deferred death and dying for others, and if so, for whom?”³

I suggest that Turkey’s queer times are co-constitutive with the queer times of homonationalism. In other words, Turkey’s queer times and homonationalism’s queer times create the conditions that make each other possible, so they must be understood and analyzed in relationship to each other. However, while they are constitutively linked, the homonationalist framework in its current deployments makes Turkey’s queer times, and especially the AKP

1 The movements in Turkey use the abbreviation LGBTI+ for lezbiyen, gey, biseksüel, trans, interseks + (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex +). For simplicity’s sake, I have chosen to use the abbreviation LGBT throughout.

2 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

3 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 36.

government's marriage of neoliberalism and Islam, an epistemic impossibility. This is first and foremost because the logic of this formula places neoliberalism always already in the "West." Neoliberalism then produces (Western) homo-normative subjects, who, when folded into (national) life and are hailed by the ideology of nationalism, also join the fight against Islam. In this storyline Muslims emerge as the victims or targets of neoliberalism, never as the subjects or agents. Puar's exclusive focus on the racialization of Islam in the United States and the UK due to normative queer secularity reduces Islam to an "undesirable ethnicity" and overlooks it as a religious structure entangled with the political economy. It also renders unimaginable queer secular Muslims or liberal Muslims. As I argue, Puar's queer times not only fail to attend to these empirical realities but render them unintelligible.

In other words, I suggest not that the framework of homonationalism is faulty but rather that it is incomplete without attention to the queer times unfolding throughout the world—in my case, the coeval moderate Islamist queer times of Turkey's AKP government. As right-wing and mainstream politics in the "West" have mobilized alleged Muslim homophobia to justify waging neocolonial wars on the Middle East, right-wing "moderate Islamist" governments have simultaneously begun to use rhetorics that evoke, reify, utilize, and reproduce "Islam" in ways that mirror and thus reproduce this radical alterity of Islam. For instance, Turkey's AKP has voiced arguments including poststructuralist critiques of Enlightenment values and the hypocrisy of Western civilization, in contrast to an "authentic" and superior Islamic morality. This rhetoric is evident in President Erdoğan's frequent speeches calling out European nations for their lack of care about Syrian refugees and their false humanitarianism. Meanwhile, millions of Syrian refugees continue to live in atrocious conditions in Turkey while Erdoğan threatens to open the borders and provide passage to refugees if the EU does not deliver the aid money it has promised. This "Islamic" morality is then deployed to legitimate expanding state power and to justify neoliberal precarity and the marginalization of ever-larger groups of people under neoliberal Islam. In other words, under AKP's neoliberal Islam, not only are queers *not* folded into life, but subjects previously considered respectable increasingly face financial precarity, criminalization, and incarceration. Considering these two queer times together is crucial for understanding the difficulties faced by both queer movements and by scholarship about queer times in Muslim-majority countries today.

I take the concept of homonationalism and its queer times as a paradigm made possible by queer theory's current episteme and thus as a symptom of its epistemic limits. Analyzing Turkey's queer times is useful not only to expose these limits, but also in order to think about truly transnationalizing queer studies. I first discuss the epistemic challenges of studying and theorizing about

LGBT struggles in Turkey, focusing on the suspicion of “queer” when it travels “East.” I then problematize two assumptions built into this episteme: (1) a reified understanding of Islam as the victim Other of Western modernity, which is made possible by (2) an ahistorical and national treatment of language and culture. These assumptions illustrate two dimensions of the limitations of queer studies’ understanding of “cultural difference.” Since these assumptions are also reflected in homonationalism’s queer times, I will refer to them throughout my discussion to illustrate the epistemic dead-ends produced by queer studies’ current paradigms. I conclude by arguing that a truly transnationalized queer studies would get us out of the universalism–particularism binary and would not see “non-Western” geographies as alternatives to Western liberalism.

Queer as a symptom of colonial modernity

To produce scholarly analyses of Turkey’s queer times, one must make a case for the very use of the term “queer” in the context of Turkey. This is not a straightforward matter, due to suspicions that queerness constitutes a symptom of (neo)colonial modernity. The term owes this reputation to two silent equivalences in the field. The first stems from the Foucaultian⁴ emphasis on the centrality of sexual subjectivity to modernity, which has resulted in scholars understanding sexual subjectivity automatically as a result of modernity. The second equivalence follows from discussions of the colonial and neocolonial effects of modernity, especially modernity’s dissemination of Enlightenment values and the universal human into “non-Western” contexts. In other words, if sexual subjectivity is a key marker of modernity, and if modernity is a “Western” colonial imposition of Enlightenment values as universals onto the rest of the world, then LGBT, or at least gay and lesbian, come under suspicion as epistemic impositions of colonial modernity.

While Foucault himself paid no attention to the colonial context of the European imperial metropolises he analyzed, much critical work has since documented the centrality of colonialism to early modernity.⁵ Scholars have questioned Foucault’s clear-cut division between *Scientia Sexualis* and *Ars Erotica* and the neat mapping of these formations onto the binaries of modern–pre-modern and West–East.⁶ This distinction between a “Western” science

4 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (New York: Random House, 1978).

5 Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

6 Dina Al-Kassim, “Psychoanalysis and the Postcolonial Genealogy of Queer Theory,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (2013): 343–6; Petrus Liu, *Queer Marxism in Two Chinas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translation across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 321–44.

of sexuality and an “Eastern” art of the erotic, where the former was preoccupied with scientifically locatable desires inside the subject and the latter with surface pleasures and titillations, was made possible partially by Foucault’s general inattention to the colonial context of the metropolitan, modern Europe he theorized.⁷ Ann Stoler in particular has demonstrated that the management of colonized sexualities was central to the production of white, European, bourgeois sensibilities.

Further, accounting for the colonial context of Europe revealed that deployment of sexuality did not simply replace deployment of alliance. Foucault argued that modernity affected a shift in the regulatory mechanisms of sexuality. Whereas the old mechanism, deployment of alliance, had focused on regulating reproductive capacities through religion and law, the new mechanism consisted of the scientific and in particular medical and psychoanalytic management of individual desires, often divorced from actual sex acts. Stoler demonstrated that the administration of colonial sexuality was equally predicated upon the regulation of colonized people’s *reproductive* capacities and upon the positioning of their racialized *desires* as abnormal. As scholars of Euro-modernity underlined modernity’s colonial and imperial functions and critiqued the understanding of Enlightenment ideals as universals in which uncivilized “savage others” simply need to be brought in line with the project of civilized “global humanity,”⁸ it was only a matter of time before queer studies investigated sexual subjectivity as one of those imperial functions.⁹ As a result, sexual subjects in the “non-West” have come under scrutiny as markers of cultural imperialism.

Because modern *subjectivity* implicitly marks ultimate (colonial–imperial) *difference* in accounts that follow a Foucaultian definition of modernity, much work in sexuality and queer studies has inevitably questioned the “authenticity” of modern sexual identity categories such as “gay” and “lesbian,” and much anthropological work has focused on “local” (presumed indigenous) sexual formations in the so-called non-West, such as *waria*, *kathoei*, *bakla*, *hijra*, and others.¹⁰ While scholars vary in their positions regarding the implications

7 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

8 See Julietta Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Samera Esmier, *Juridical Humanity: A Colonial History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

9 See David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz, “Introduction: What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” *Social Text* 23, nos. 3–4 (2005): 1–17.

10 Evelyn Blackwood, “Sexuality and Gender in Certain Native American Tribes: The Case of Cross-Gender Females,” in *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs*, ed. E. B. Freedman, B. C. Gelpi, and K. M. Weston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); J. Gay, “‘Mummies and Babies’ and Friends and Lovers in Lesotho,” in *Anthropology and Homosexual Behavior*, ed. Evelyn Blackwood (New York: Haworth, 1985); Serena Nanda, *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* (New York: Wadsworth, 1990); Will Roscoe, *The Zuni Man–Woman* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

of the travel of modern sexual identity categories vis-à-vis colonial modernity and globalization, no other “non-Western” formations of “modernity” are similarly questioned regarding their “indigeneity”: this includes the existence of the nation-state form, stock exchanges, modern public transportation systems, police force, prisons, welfare systems, modern legal systems, or a modern army.¹¹ In other words, while an LGBT organization in Syria can alert queer studies to potential (queer) Western imperialism, the capacity of a nation-state, or a modern army, for Western imperial takeover is not debated.

When the spread of the term “queer” is understood as a symptom of colonial modernity, LGBT activism comes under special scrutiny as the main disseminator of this episteme. This is particularly relevant to studying Turkey’s queer times because the rising feminist and queer movements are as critical to defining these times as are the morality politics of the government they organize against. For instance, Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs*¹² infamously suggested that international LGBT organizations, as well as “local” groups with similar activist agendas that he collectively termed *The Gay International*, have spread the homo–hetero binary and epistemically produced gays and lesbians where they did not exist. According to Massad, this conversion of previously desiring subjects into gays and lesbians works to further *heterosexualize* the world, as many subjects with complex desires feel compelled to think of themselves and identify as heterosexual as a result.¹³ Massad maintains:

Because it has solicited and received some support from Arab and Muslim native informants who are mostly located in the United States and who accept its sexual categories and identities, the Gay International’s imperialist epistemological task is proceeding apace with little opposition from the majority of sexual beings it wants to “liberate” and whose social and sexual worlds it is destroying in the process.¹⁴

11 Tom Boellstorff’s careful analysis of the emergence of *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities in the context of the Indonesian nation-state implies that the *gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities (experienced differently from United States *gay* and *lesbian* subjectivity) are no less “authentic” to Indonesia than is the nation-state form. It is unfortunate that Boellstorff only engages with Islam in a separate article, where he positions Islam and *gay* identity in Indonesia as a habitable incommensurability. See Tom Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Tom Boellstorff, “Between Religion and Desire: Being Muslim and Gay in Indonesia,” *American Anthropologist* 107 (2005): 575–85.

12 Joseph Andoni Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

13 Joseph Massad is not concerned with trans or otherwise gender-nonconforming subjects, who of course complicate his argument of epistemic production of desiring subjects as *gay* or *lesbian*. While he explicitly refers to “*gays* and *lesbians*,” the subjects he discusses are exclusively *gay men*. For a critique of Massad’s lack of attention to queer women see Gil Z. Hochberg, “Introduction: Israelis, Palestinians, Queers: Points of Departure,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* no. 4 (2010): 493–516.

14 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 385.

Accordingly, authentic and local sexualities are under threat from the global, colonial, universalizing LGBT activism. This account leaves no room for a complex transnationality of sexual formations and imagines neocolonial discourses as the only force of change.

Several elements of this analytic sequence, which presumes (1) that modernity is marked by the rise of sexual subjectivity; (2) that one of the significant outcomes of modernity has been cultural imperialism; and therefore (3) that modern sexual subjectivity is a sign of cultural imperialism that deserves scrutiny. For one, it treats the “non-West” as synonymous with postcoloniality. Furthermore, it reduces the effects of modernity to the effects of colonialism and to the production of sexual subjectivities and identities. These reductions are made possible by a series of binaries such as modern–traditional, colonial–authentic, global–local, and West–East (or North–South). Instead of focusing scholarly energies on exposing the unstable nature of *all* of these categories, we have witnessed an increasing homogenization and reification of the “West,” “colonial,” and “modern” in the name of critiquing those categories.¹⁵ In order to scrutinize the supposed universality of the first terms, there is a turn to the particularity of the second, which only reifies the universality of the first term. This is because, when “[d]efined in opposition to the particular, universality cannot exist without the concept of the particular”; thus, paradoxically, universality must invent cultural difference in order to disavow it.¹⁶

It is important to recognize that Puar’s homonational queer times does not deal with queers or queer organizing in Muslim-majority countries. In fact, she problematizes the presumed incommensurability between Muslim and queer. Yet, while making room for queer Muslims in theory, Puar’s framework produces another important incommensurability, between Muslim and secular. In the context of Turkey, many secular Muslim queers (along with some pious Muslim queers) are protesting the AKP’s neoliberal Islamist rule today. Further, homonationalism as a framework inadvertently makes LGBT activism in Muslim-majority countries problematic because any queer organizing that blames the nation for structural heteronormativity ultimately fuels the homonationalist trope that Islam and thus Muslim-majority countries are backwards, non-democratic, and deeply homophobic.¹⁷ Finally, because Puar positions

15 All of the scholarship cited in note 7 are examples of this tendency. See also Martin Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) for a discussion of *bakla* and Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago* for a discussion of *waria*, *gay*, and *lesbi*, all of which index various forms of non-Western difference.

16 Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights*.

17 For an extended discussion on the effects of Puar’s scholarship on the queer Palestinian solidarity movement, see Sa’ed Atshan, *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

Islam as the victim other of the neoliberalism-homonormativity-homonationalism complex, her framework renders a neoliberal Islamic order unintelligible.

Scholars of queer activism in Turkey, and especially of associations that organize under the moniker LGBT, experience the limitations of this epistemic challenge in at least two ways. First, studying LGBT movements in Turkey in their own right, without worrying about similarity with or difference from their “Western” counterparts, proves difficult precisely because of the question of neocolonialism at large. Second, the homonationalist framework makes studying sexual liberation movements in Muslim-majority countries especially challenging. With the first concern we must contend with the universal–particular binary: to critique the universalization of the Western gay, the scholar must first prove that the universal is not a universal after all by finding and documenting “difference.” The particularity of “cultural difference” shores up the universality of the “Western” gay even as it seeks to prove that it is not universal at all. How can we think about difference, which surely is an important part of social life, without reproducing the universal–particular binary? In terms of the second concern, we are confined by the parameters of homonationalism, which suggest that LGBT organizations reproduce the image of the “homophobic Muslim country” and therefore provide ammunition for global Islamophobia when they critique the Turkish state for its heteropatriarchal practices. Two important analytical maneuvers may help us out of the impasses caused by existing queer studies paradigms when “queer” travels to the Muslim-majority “East”: first, investigating how Islam is conceptualized in queer studies and in return what work it is invited to do; and second, unpacking the role “cultural difference” played in the field and thereby revealing its underlying theory of language.

Neoliberal Islam and the question of “Islamic difference”

The theory of homonationalism and its queer times presumes that neoliberalism is located in the West, where it folds some LGBT people into life as homonormative subjects who are respectable and loyal queer citizens. As they are increasingly welcomed into national belonging we find queers who were formerly critical of war, militarism, and nationalism participating in national homonormativity, or homonationalism. The United States’s heightened wars in the Middle East since 9/11 and rising Islamophobia, when conjoined with Orientalist representations of Muslim-majority geographies as locations of an amorphous homophobic culture, result in United States and UK queers’ increasing approval and at times participation in wars against “Islam.”

This cultural understanding of Islam found in its Orientalist representations is also featured in Puar's own framework of homonationalism, in which Islam exists only in its "racialized" form. She writes: "Religion, in particular Islam, has now supplanted race as one side of the irreconcilable binary between queer and something else."¹⁸ This point is certainly an important one in light of Puar's critique of queer secularity as an unacknowledged norm in LGBT organizing and politics. Yet the critique of representation can lock the represented into its position within the very representation one sets out to critique. One can hardly blame Puar for treating Islam as cultural, however, since little queer studies scholarship has analyzed the relationship between Islam and the political economy.¹⁹ This constitutes the first limit of epistemic paradigms in queer studies that I focus on here: the culturalization of Islam, and the resulting lack of analyses that consider Islam and the political economy together in the field.

Interestingly, capitalism *has* been a point of inquiry in queer studies scholarship on the "non-West"—it simply has not received any attention when the geography in question is Muslim-majority. In fact, capitalism has, as much as colonialism, been an important omission of Foucaultian analysis that queer studies has sought to remedy. Importantly, however, the effects of capitalism on sexual identities, politics, and subcultures in the so-called West and non-West have received varying treatments. While in the "West" capitalism's effects are discussed in terms of how it has "normalized" previously queer and abject sexual subcultures, global capitalism's effects on sexual cultures in the so-called non-West have often been reduced to the very *production* of LGBT identities and subcultures, which reduces capitalism to cultural imperialism. In "Capitalism and Global Queering" Peter Jackson suggests,

The political economy of global queering needs to relate the market to *both* the localizing and the transnational dimensions of cultural globalization, and explain how capitalism produces both modern forms of sex-cultural differentiation in some domains alongside convergence in others. [. . .] The analytic

18 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 13. I am not suggesting that race itself is "cultural." There has been an incredible array of scholarship on racial capitalism that interrupts any identitarian understanding of race (see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* [Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000 (1983)] and Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003]). Neither am I interested in producing an artificial split between the cultural and the economic. I am simply pointing out that the "something else"-ness of Islam vis-à-vis queer renders it a matter of cultural difference.

19 Cenk Özbay's *Queering Sexualities in Turkey: Gay Men, Male Prostitutes, and the City* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017) and Gül Özyegin's *New Desires, New Selves* (New York: New York University Press, 2015) are notable exceptions. See also Cenk Özbay and Evren Savcı, "Queering Commons in Turkey," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 516–21.

task is to explain how the market produces both new local forms of sexual difference and indigenous commonalities.²⁰

As a result, these capitalism and global queering debates imply that because “capitalism” and “LGBT” are implicitly understood as indigenous to the “West,” capitalism’s effects on LGBT or queer politics there are discussed within the rubric of increasing normalization and the folding of some of the previously disreputable subjects into the folds of respectability. This also makes room for potential radical queer resistance to neoliberal capitalism. In locations outside the so-called West, on the other hand, capitalism’s effects are understood as a form of cultural imperialism, contributing to the production of LGBT identities and cultures. This parallels the issue of “indigeneity” of modernity, and therefore of modern sexual categories, to the West: while gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and trans people “in the West” are understood to have been oppressed at least in the past by the heteropatriarchal state, capitalism, and juridical and medical structures, modern sexual Others in the “non-West” are products of capitalism and therefore cultural imperialism at best, and its perpetrators at worst.

Yet even this frame of capitalism’s cultural effects is missing in the study of Muslim-majority nations. In fact, so strong is the “alternative culture” status of Islam in queer studies that when the field analyzes the *Islamic* non-West, capitalism is often absent from discussions altogether.²¹ Vis-à-vis Islam, modernity’s central defining feature shifts from capitalism to secularity. In other words, there is yet another split when studying “non-Western” queer sexualities and cultures: capitalism’s effects in terms of “global queering” focus on East and Southeast Asia (and less so Africa) and rarely discuss religion, while analyses of queer cultures in Muslim-majority regions are rarely discussed in terms of the effects of neoliberal capitalism. Instead the focus has been on the Orientalist representations of an allegedly patriarchal and homophobic Middle East and the ways these representations have been evoked in the context of the “war on terror” by queer and non-queer actors and organizations. As a result, in queer studies Islam is removed from the political economy and rendered “cultural” twice over (compared to the “cultures” of other “non-Western” locations). This means in part that Islam, in conjunction the Middle East, bears an additional burden in queer studies’ relationship to “cultural difference.” To be

20 Peter A. Jackson, “Capitalism and Global Queering: National Markets, Parallels among Sexual Cultures, and Multiple Queer Modernities,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 15, no. 3 (2009): 361.

21 For some prominent examples, see Boellstorff, “Between Religion and Desire”; Tarik Bereket and Barry D. Adam, “Navigating Islam and Same-Sex Liaisons in Turkey,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 55, no. 2 (2008), 204–22; Fatima El-Tayeb, *European Others Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

clear, I am not arguing that queer studies scholars are unaware of the operations of neoliberal capitalism in Muslim-majority regions. I am rather speaking of a field formation that has prioritized and at times rendered paradigmatic approaches that separate Islam and the political economy and render Muslim-majority zones, especially the Middle East, doubly cultural. This move is also apparent in Puar's homonationalism and its queer times.

Rethinking this framework is paramount because "Islam" today serves as a popular "cultural alternative" to Western modernity, regardless of whether it is denounced or embraced as difference. Dirlik²² suggests in his critique of "alternative modernities" that a search for alternatives to capitalism is nothing new—but since the 1980s, "cultural difference" has become the most important marker of these alternatives.²³ As alternatives are increasingly sought among "other cultures," Islam's emergence as an option has even further culturalized Islam. Under neoliberal incorporation this has meant in part that "Islamic civilization" could be packaged and marketed by the Turkish AKP government while participating in projects such as the "Alliance of Civilizations."²⁴ I do not make these points to deny the existence of difference—an extremely complex reality—but instead to ask: when and why is difference deconstructed, and its neoliberal incorporation critiqued, in our analyses, and when is it embraced as an "alternative" or resistant reality to "Western modernity"?

This understanding of capitalism as cultural imperialism poses two challenges to studying Turkey's queer times. First, it makes neoliberal Islam, a core feature of contemporary Turkish politics, unintelligible, because neoliberal capitalism is imagined as a colonial force and Islam as "authentic" to Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East. This understanding also renders queer critiques of neoliberal capitalism in Turkey, such as the protests of rampant privatization and urban renewal projects, unintelligible to

22 Arif Dirlik, "Thinking Modernity Historically: Is 'Alternative Modernity' the Answer?" *Asian Review of World Histories* 1, no. 1 (2013): 5–44.

23 A number of Marxist critiques of postcolonialism have voiced similar concerns regarding the reification of East–West and colonial–authentic binaries, as well as Dirlik's critique of "alternative modernities" (see Vasant Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincializing Europe* [Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015]).

24 As underlined by Dirlik, "Islamic civilization" has been proposed as a true alternative to Western civilization by Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of the masterminds behind the AKP, who has served in various higher-ranking positions, including chief advisor to then Prime Minister Erdoğan, as minister of foreign Affairs, and prime minister of the party. In 2007, the AKP's neoliberal branding project "Alliance of Civilizations," a riff on "Clash of Civilizations," rested on the same neat distinctions between "East" and "West" that reify an ahistorical culture of each "civilization." Such a reification of difference makes it easy to package and sell nations worldwide via neoliberal branding projects. Dirlik, "Thinking Modernity Historically"; Iğsız, Aslı, "From Alliance of Civilizations to Branding the Nation: Turkish Studies, Image Wars and the Politics of Comparison in an Age of Neoliberalism," *Turkish Studies* 15, no. 4 (2014): 689–704.

United States queer theorists, since LGBT movements are considered an effect of neoliberal capitalism. Both of these analytic impasses illustrate how the colonial–authentic, global–local, and modern–traditional binaries make possible and in turn reproduce the imagined equivalence of capitalism and cultural imperialism.

Despite my criticisms of the term “Islamophobia,” especially its imprecision and awkwardness in Muslim-majority contexts, I find the term relevant in the context of Turkey because of the Republic’s history of staunch nationalist and militarist secularism. While reductive treatments of “Islam” or “Muslims” do not unfold in the same ways among Turkish secularists as they do among their American or western European counterparts, these reifications of religion and piety are nevertheless powerful. The Turkish Republic was established as a secular nation-state, and many reforms at the time aimed to diminish Islam’s centrality to the cultural and social fabric of the nation as a way to erase old forms of authority associated with the Ottoman Empire; in particular I am thinking of such changes as the secularization of the country through the removal of the caliphate—the spiritual leadership of the Muslim world that had resided with the Ottoman Empire since 1517—and the outlawing of tekke and zaviye (religious orders) and their leaders; moving from an Arabic alphabet to a Latin one; changing from the Islamic calendar and the old weights and measures to Western ones; strongly encouraging a Western “civilized” dress code; and secularizing, centralizing, and nationalizing education. Popular Islam was cast as backward, and religious sects called tarikats were cast as centers of superstition, passivity, and laziness that stood in the way of enlightened modernization and progress.²⁵ The Republic’s staunch secularism continued to manifest itself in the closure of a number of Islamist parties, the temporary blocking of politicians with Islamist views from political activity, and the ban on wearing headscarf for students on university campuses and anyone occupying public office, a rule strictly enforced after 1997. This history has played an important role in ushering in the current political moment, where a “moderately Islamist” Turkish government can rely on past abjectification of Islamic piety in order to speak on behalf of a homogeneous Islam.

Of course, what the AKP has accomplished since its arrival in power, especially its reelection for a third term in 2011, is not simply liberal

25 Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Andrew Finkel and Nükhet Sirman, “Introduction,” in *Turkish State, Turkish Society*, edited by Andrew Finkel and Nükhet Sirman (New York: Routledge, 1990), 1–20; Deniz Kandiyoti, “End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey,” in *Women, Islam and the State*, edited by Deniz Kandiyoti (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 22–48; Ronnie Margulies and Ergin Yildizoglu, “The Political Uses of Islam in Turkey,” *Middle East Report* 153 (July/August 1988): 12–17.

representation of the pious but a reversal of previous power paradigms. The party that championed ethnic and religious minority rights in 2008 has since 2011 relentlessly persecuted, purged, and arrested Kurdish politicians, academics, activists, and journalists. The government has also shifted from a narrative of religious freedom and the right to university education for headscarf-wearing students to a narrative that evokes Islamic piety to mark those critical of the government as immoral others seeking the nation's downfall. By 2013 it was no longer surprising to find President Erdoğan making false claims to delegitimize protests against his rule and against neo-liberal privatization and dispossession in the country: he suggested that Gezi Park protestors had entered a mosque with their shoes on and had drunk beer inside and alleged that they had assaulted his "sisters" with headscarves.²⁶ Nor is it surprising to find that such claims have further polarized the population in a country where Islamic piety has been historically associated with backwardness, ignorance, and lack of modernity. Erdoğan and other AKP officials' employment of "Islam" simply perpetuates domestic Islamophobia because the government's conflation of Islamic morality and its own governance has been effective in both consolidating a loyal voter base and also producing a secular backlash against Islam and piety that is now closely associated with the AKP. On the other hand, LGBT activists, as much as anyone else concerned with social justice, must critique the invocation of an ominous "Islam" to justify inequality, labor repression, misogyny, and all forms of discrimination.²⁷ This must be accomplished without relying on binaries that position LGBT on the side of the modern, the global, and the colonial and Islam on the side of the traditional, the backward, the local, and the authentic. To unpack what has made these binaries and the "culturalization" of Islam possible in queer studies, I turn to the underlying theory of language, and thus of culture, in the field.

26 The mosque's imam immediately renounced this claim, stating that the protestors had escaped from police violence and had turned the mosque into an infirmary for those wounded by tear gas canisters and plastic bullets. He was reassigned a few months after his refusal to testify to confirm the protestors' alcohol consumption in Dolmabahçe Mosque. www.hurriyet.com.tr/dolmabahce-camisinin-imam-ve-muezzini-gitti-24756039.

27 Such moments crystallize for instance in an increasing reliance on alleged Islamic values such as *fitrat* (God-given nature) to justify miners' deaths, suggesting mine explosions are in the *fitrat* of a miners' life. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-t7z6dyKwTE; www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/erdogan-senin-kadere-imanin-yoksa,93JK2SbdQk6S57a27qslmQ.

Translation and the question of linguistic travel

Language in its transnational capacities has been undertheorized in queer studies. I recognize that this is a bold claim given the poststructuralist foundations of the field: for queer theorists, language is not descriptive but *constitutive* of the real. Yet the unspoken assumption in the field has been that the language in question was always already English. Further, language has often been treated ahistorically and as strictly discursive. The only linguistic change that the field has addressed is imagined to have been mobilized by global modernity, in which English-language and “Western” categories travel to the rest of the world, whether to produce epistemic violence or more complex, “localized” forms of meaning. These presumptions have enabled scholars to think of “local” (read: indigenous) linguistic expressions of gender and sexual non-normativity as indicative of authenticity, untouched by (neo)colonial modernity.

Translation studies scholars challenge this assumed equivalence between nation, culture, and language and help make sense of queer politics in Turkey beyond the authentic–colonial binary. They suggest that understanding translation as “a transfer of message from one clearly circumscribed language community into another”²⁸ presumes languages to be homogenous and distinguishable entities, between which translation acts as a filter. Likening this presumed linguistic equivalence to capitalist equivalence between commodities, Jon Solomon²⁹ calls this modern system “translational accumulation.” Translational accumulation assumes that language and systems of signs are equivalent and commensurable and that translation traverses the gap of linguistic difference.³⁰ The contemporary “international” system constituted by nation-states is shored up by “national languages” as markers of national and presumed cultural difference. In other words, the modern regime of translation shores up anthropological difference by equating nation, culture, and language—the very structure that makes possible the double bind of universalism and cultural imperialism versus particularism and cultural authenticity. Naoki Sakai³¹ has termed this system, which imagines the world as made up of communities of easily distinguishable, autonomous languages (a united nations model of languages), the “homolingual address.”

28 Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On “Japan” and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

29 Jon Solomon, “The Post-Imperial Etiquette and the Affective Structure of Areas,” *Translation: A Transdisciplinary Journal* 2 (2014), 171–201.

30 This of course conveniently overlooks the fact that when other languages are translated into American English, translation is often employed as a mechanism of domesticating and incorporating what is alien and unfamiliar. See Vicente Rafael, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

31 Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*.

The homolingual address informs queer studies' unquestioning equation of (national) language with (national) culture: if there is no "indigenous" vocabulary of a given concept, that concept must not be "indigenous" to that culture. The homolingual address also obliterates the political histories of linguistic erasures and suturing. This is particularly important in light of national projects that violently impose a myth of "linguistic unity" onto polyglot peoples. Arguments that equate the appearance of new names for sexual subjectivity, such as "gay," in a particular language as a colonial effect inevitably naturalize national languages as "indigenous," thereby erasing the polyglot histories of these spaces as well as ongoing struggles to maintain them, which in the case of Turkey includes speakers of Kurdish, Armenian, Circassian, Zazaki, Laz, Greek, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, or Ladino.³² Since Foucaultian theory indexes subjectivity as the key marker of modernity, and since queer studies equates the existence of "modern categories of identity" as the marker of colonial erasure of authentic "culture,"³³ "indigenous" linguistic markers become signs of the persistence of authentic cultures in the face of neocolonial modernity.

According to this problematic equivalence, to analyze Turkey's queer times is to impose Western categories where they do not belong—because LGBT and queer are concepts considered "indigenous" to the West. This paradigm historically channeled scholars' energies into either justifying their or their interlocutors' use of LGBT and/or queer as terminology or frameworks, or into focusing on "local" terms of gender and sexual nonconformity. In the case of Turkey this epistemic challenge requires scholars to demonstrate that LGBT subjects or queer politics of Turkey are essentially Turkish, or to focus on local queer formations such as *lubunya* without attending to their entanglements with various dimensions of modernity. Scholars of queer times in Turkey therefore face the challenge of not reproducing the binaries of global–local, modern–traditional, and colonial–authentic. They also face the challenge of not reducing the cultural to the linguistic, by imagining the Turkish language to stand for Turkish culture as opposed to the colonial force of global English, an approach that veils the violent historical erasures that established Turkish both as a nationality and as a language.

Translation studies is helpful in this regard because even though the modern regime of translation might imply equivalence between languages and cultures, scholars show that translation can expose the disjunctive nature of communication: "[T]he heterolingual address does not abide by the normalcy

32 Yael Navaro-Yasin, *The Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

33 Also see Mourad for a critique of equating translated sexual terminology with cultural inauthenticity in the context of Lebanon. Sara Mourad, "Queering the Mother Tongue," *Sexuality Research in Communication* 7 (2013): 2533–46.

of reciprocal and transparent communication, but instead assumes every utterance can *fail* to communicate because heterogeneity is inherent in any medium, linguistic or otherwise.”³⁴ Since, per Sakai’s understanding, translation is a social relation, the point here is not to reject the possibility of a “we” but to reject that such a “we” automatically stems (or should stem) from a linguistic, national, or ethnic unity. Again, the emphasis on language as a social practice exposes queer studies’ nearly exclusive discursive approach to language that detaches it from subjects and “dispense[s] with the hermeneutic problematics of the horizon of understanding. Ineluctably, translation introduces a disjunctive instability into the putatively *personal* relations among the agents of speech, writing, listening, and reading.” Since “[w]ithout the process of signification, cultural differences themselves would never be there as ontologized differences between beings,”³⁵ being attentive to our signification practices is paramount even when they are endowed with the best of intentions, such as exposing the rising Islamophobia and racism in the United States, even among its queers.

Toward a truly transnational queer studies

How can scholars of Turkey’s queer times engage with these challenges in productive ways? How can we contribute to queer studies by exposing frames that have become paradigmatic in the field in such a way that they render many aspects of Turkey’s queer times unintelligible?

Transnational feminism’s interventions are helpful here, along with translation studies. In both fields scholars have urged us to contemplate how to understand difference as an important and complex social reality that should neither be reified nor erased. Centralizing power in our analyses without relying on and in turn reifying North–South or West–East binaries requires that we think about hegemony as multiple and *scattered* under conditions of transnational connectivity.³⁶ Transnational feminists have also warned against producing in our analyses “third world difference”³⁷ as an ahistorical, essential, and homogenous empirical reality. Although these warnings were directed at the production of that difference in negative representations of

34 Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 8, emphasis mine.

35 Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 13, 121.

36 Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Global Identities: Theorizing Transnational Theories of Sexuality,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, no. 4 (2001): 663–79; Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

37 Chandra Talpade Mohanty. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 60–88.

the Third World, positive representations can be equally problematic if they culturalize places and peoples and thus render them homogenous and ahistorical. Transnational feminism proposes that we seek to understand the connections and collusions of interest between different patriarchies, different fundamentalisms, different authoritarianisms, and different racisms worldwide without recourse to East–West or North–South binaries, which are often read through modernist tropes of progress and modernity versus backwardness and tradition. Because emphasizing the particularity of the “local” often reproduces the universality of the center, which is typically the Euro-American “West,”³⁸ showing the messy, multiple, and transnational nature of the “local” becomes crucial to transnational analysis.

The case of Turkey has particular salience for crafting a transnational queer studies and unsettling the binaries I have laid out, because grounding queer studies work in Turkey means writing from a “non-Western,” non-postcolonial location. As the descendant of an empire and thanks to its current imperial aspirations as exemplified in its military invasion of Syria, Turkey throws a wrench in the ongoing reproduction of the colonized East–colonial West divide.³⁹ The Republic interrupts the representation of Islam as the victim Other of the imperial “West” with its history of repressive secularism and its present state of repressive Sunni Islamism.

Second, Turkey’s queer times demonstrate that considering the implications of reifying both the “non-West” and the “West” is intellectually and politically imperative. President Erdoğan uses such reifications of the enemy “West” as a rhetorical staple in his attempts to shore up nationalist Islamism. This discursive tool also further polarizes the public into proper believers/nationalists on the one hand and those who align with powers that seek the downfall of the Republic on the other. An approach that is as committed to avoiding Occidentalisms as it is to debunking Orientalisms will help forgo totalizing notions of “the West” and make sense of it as “a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a complex, shifting otherness.”⁴⁰ Such an approach also must be mindful of the fact that Orientalism is not the purview of the so-called West.⁴¹

Following from the first and second points, Turkey’s queer times can serve as a reminder that hegemonies are multiple and scattered, not centralized.⁴² It

38 Hua, *Trafficking Women’s Human Rights*.

39 www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32412/Turkey%E2%80%99s-Three-Front-War.

40 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); see also Meltem Ahiska, “Occidentalism: The Historical Fantasy of the Modern,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102, no. 2–3 (2003): 351–7.

41 Ussama Makdisi, “Ottoman Orientalism,” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768–96.

42 Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

is important to continue to criticize United States imperialism, of course, but we must attend to other centers of power and sovereignty as well as the complex historical and transnational links between them. We must insist on looking for *complicities* as we critique structures that distribute uneven life chances.

Scholarship that attends to Turkey's queer times can also work to disrupt the relegation of everything, including capitalism, to "culture" in the "non-West" in discussions of sexual formations. This will enable scholars to see global queer movements not simply as products of capitalism but as its most important potential critics. I do not suggest an additive model, where we add the axis of class to the axis of sexuality in our analyses. Rather, I propose that employing sexuality as a lens to understand neoliberal capitalism and its moralizing logics is a worthwhile exercise everywhere, not only in the so-called West.

Further, scholarship on Turkey's queer times has the potential to show the complexity and multiplicity of "the local." It is a common instinct to turn to the particularity of "the local" to question and destabilize the universal in queer studies and other critical scholarship. Yet that approach reifies and homogenizes the local, implying that it does not contain complexities and contradictions itself. That is why, despite my framework of "Turkey's queer times," my goal is not to simply add Turkey to the map of queer studies; that would simply particularize Turkey, inevitably emphasizing its difference from the "West" and reproducing the universalism of the center. Instead we must consider various issues Turkey's LGBT struggles have faced and continue to face, without exceptionalizing them, without erasing their differences, and without presenting these struggles as if they form a unified front. This includes such things as class divides within the movement and different positions queers occupy vis-à-vis involvement in formal politics versus street-based activism or queers' varied relations to religion and secularism. This approach will help interrupt the global-local binaries that are reproduced in so much sexualities and queer studies work, even when the unit of the local is "the national."⁴³

This last point inevitably necessitates an uncoupling of language and culture. Without this reduction of the cultural to the linguistic, whereby both of those terms are treated as ahistorical and homogenous, what is often *national* language terminology can no longer be taken as a signifier of "cultural authenticity." Further, multiplicities of the local should not simply consist of demonstrating "variations" within the local—such as political positions, understandings and practices of piety, and sexual subcultures. Scholarship that takes this task seriously must take into account the deep transnational histories of the "local" as well as its transnational entanglements today.

43 Boellstorff, *The Gay Archipelago*.

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