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# Decolonial Queering: The Politics of Being Queer in Palestine

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This article analyzes the work of Palestine’s most established queer rights organization, alQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, to reveal the political power of being queer in Palestine. It argues that an open, feminist, queer space such as alQaws is a productive site to think and practice decolonization. Relying on the author’s direct involvement with the group, the article traces the development of queer Palestinian thought to provide a critique of queer politics in Palestine: it recounts how since the establishment of the organization in 2001, alQaws activists have increasingly transcended exclusivist gay identifications and rejected singling out sexuality as a discrete site of oppression disconnected from Zionist settler colonialism. The discussion covers Israeli pinkwashing and its counter, Palestinian pinkwatching; it deconstructs pinkwashing narratives, rejects the myth of the colonial savior, and reveals how discourses of sexual progress reproduce Zionist colonialism. It also documents alQaws’s challenge to normalizing development discourse.

THIS ARTICLE POSITS that queerness in Palestine is an essential element of the Palestinian struggle to eradicate Zionist settler colonialism. It draws on the work of alQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society, Palestine’s most vocal and prominent grassroots queer initiative. alQaws’s vision is to disrupt “sexual and gender-based oppression” and to challenge the “regulation of Palestinian sexualities and bodies, whether patriarchal, capitalist, or colonial” in order to build a society “that celebrates diverse sexualities, sexual orientations, and genders”—in other words, to queer Palestine.<sup>1</sup> Despite alQaws’s official establishment in 2007, and an earlier decade of activity under the umbrella of an Israeli LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) organization, there remains limited engagement with alQaws’s work, in particular, and Palestinian queer politics, in general, reflecting a broader skepticism about the relevance of *sexuality* politics to the Palestinian context.

While the very notion of queer is deemed controversial by those who consider it a Western concept<sup>2</sup> that is irrelevant to the Palestinians—and worse, that it threatens to recolonize Palestinians by turning them into “Euro-American” subjects<sup>3</sup>—this article argues that an open, feminist, and queer space such as alQaws is a productive site to think and practice decolonization. Queering

Palestine both illuminates the significance of queerness to Palestine (and to all Palestinians regardless of their sexual identity) and invites a reconceptualization of scholarly engagement with the question of queerness in Palestine. Privileging alQaws's ideas and practices, this article relies on three major elements: my direct involvement with the group as a researcher and Palestinian feminist, both in the West Bank and elsewhere; numerous conversations conducted with members of alQaws; and an engagement with the writings of founding member and current director Haneen Maikey.

## Being Queer in Palestine

The launch of the Oslo peace process in the early 1990s raised hopes for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict founded on mutual respect, economic peace, and coexistence.<sup>4</sup> The ensuing wave of optimism led many Palestinian and Israeli human rights groups to team up and launch collaborative projects. alQaws was one such project. In 2001, the group established itself informally under the umbrella of Jerusalem Open House (JOH), an Israeli LGBT organization, with members meeting in JOH spaces to explore questions of sexual orientation. However, as the Second Intifada (2000–2005) unfolded concurrently with the joint alQaws-JOH initiative, this collaboration eroded.

Oslo had turned into a negotiating process over “the terms of Palestinian surrender to Israel rather than a genuine peace agreement,” in the words of Mark Levine.<sup>5</sup> Under Oslo, occupation became more entrenched, the process of Palestinian dispossession intensified, and settlement construction grew exponentially, as did barriers, walls, and checkpoints.<sup>6</sup> When the Palestinians launched their uprising in September 2000, Israel's response to their dashed hopes for peace, economic prosperity, and an end to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza was to further escalate the violence perpetrated against them. During this “crackdown,” Israel targeted, wounded, and killed Palestinians both within the 1949 armistice lines (so-called Israel proper) and in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt).<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, members of alQaws faced growing logistical constraints, such as travel difficulties and repeated harassment by Israeli soldiers. Most importantly perhaps, their discussions of sexuality became increasingly inextricable from political questions.

The Second Intifada forced alQaws to confront the political implications for Palestinians of addressing questions of sexuality within the ambit of an ostensibly “apolitical organization.”<sup>8</sup> As the group began to reevaluate its affiliation with Israeli LGBT initiatives, the deeper question of what it meant “to be queer in Palestine” and to be a “*Palestinian* queer” (my emphasis) also became pressing.<sup>9</sup> Developing a queer critique of Palestine's colonization also challenged JOH's ostensibly apolitical self-definition.<sup>10</sup> Hitherto, Palestinian queers had grounded their queerness in Israeli LGBT spaces, which precluded the possibility of questioning their very Palestinian-ness, that is, the reality of their existence under a colonial regime. Cooperation with the JOH reproduced the colonizer/colonized dynamic. “We couldn't use the word ‘occupation’ because this ‘apolitical’ Zionist organization wouldn't allow it. . . . In 2005 we decided to split from JOH,” Maikey subsequently explained.<sup>11</sup> The process of alQaws's redefinition came in response to a political situation that “was imposing itself” in everyday discussions, giving rise to a process of reflection

that continues to this day on being queer and remaining a “relevant and integral part of Palestinian society which is struggling with a lot of social and political issues.”<sup>12</sup>

This development was concurrent with alQaws’s increasingly critical view of single-issue politics. Experiences with Israeli LGBT groups had exposed alQaws to unitary gay politics, that is, an espousal of a progressive stance on LGBT questions while denying the settler-colonial violence undergirding Zionist discourse and practice. The aftermath of a homophobic incident, in which a Jewish-Israeli gunman killed two people at a gay bar in Tel Aviv in 2009, exemplifies that dynamic.<sup>13</sup> At an event to commemorate the victims, several Palestinian LGBT groups were banned from participating for fear that they might “talk politics.”<sup>14</sup> Simultaneously, the event celebrated Israeli politicians’ “Do Not Kill” message to the backdrop of “Hatikvah”<sup>15</sup>—the Israeli national anthem that proclaims exclusive Jewish entitlement to Palestine, identified as the “land of Zion.”<sup>16</sup> Those same Israeli politicians had cheered the 2008–9 Israeli attack on Gaza (code-named Operation Cast Lead) and the massacre of Palestinians there a few months earlier.<sup>17</sup> This anecdote exemplifies how single-issue politics and Israeli pride parades were occasions to reproduce and glorify the Zionist settler-colonial project based on the violent erasure of Palestinians while simultaneously “being proud Israelis and queers.”<sup>18</sup>

For alQaws, then, grounding Palestine in queerness and queerness in Palestine grew ever more urgent as it became increasingly clear that the single-issue approach could not address the colonial reality of Palestinians. Hence, “decolonial queering” required transcending exclusivist gay identifications and constructing possibilities for gay re-signification, captured in the organization’s full name when it established itself as a separate entity in 2007: alQaws for Sexual and Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society (*al-qaws lil-ta’addudiyya al-jinsiyya wal-jindiriyya fil mujtama’a al-filastini*). While *qaws* is the Arabic word for rainbow, a now-universally recognized symbol associated with LGBT politics, alQaws’s rainbow embraces sexual and gender diversity (*al’adudiyya al-jinsiyya wal jindariyya*) and, in addition, positions itself clearly within Palestinian society (*fil mujtama’a al-filastini*).<sup>19</sup> Thus, it grounds sexuality in a sociopolitical context that does not elide the colonial reality of Palestine. In this process of naming, alQaws re-signified the exclusionary politics of gayness and the standard LGBT framework to embrace what Judith Butler has described as queering and twisting.<sup>20</sup> By expanding the rainbow to include “other possibilities,” alQaws redeployed dominant norms to render the concept of decolonial queering more politically effective.<sup>21</sup>

Inviting us to approach sexuality in relation to politics, decolonial queering facilitates practicing and thinking decolonization in Palestine. To borrow from José Muñoz, queerness is political *and* relational: it proffers visions of/aspirations for a future “that resists mandates to accept that which is not enough.”<sup>22</sup> In that vein, alQaws’s activism is imbued with the broader political dynamic that characterizes colonial reality in Palestine.

## Pinkwashing, Pinkwatching, and Constructing a Decolonial Framework

Pinkwashing is Israel’s practice of branding itself as a modern, progressive society and gay haven while simultaneously depicting Palestinian society as reactionary and homophobic. The tactic seems to have begun in 2002 when Israel recruited its Jewish LGBT community to help promote itself using

so-called pink-progressive and LGBT-friendly tropes. In 2005, the effort culminated in an official multimillion-dollar campaign “rebranding” Israel as a modern democracy and gay destination.<sup>23</sup> Presenting itself as “the only democratic and LGBT-friendly country in the Middle East” while simultaneously continuing to expand the colonization of Palestinian land, Israel legitimizes its illegal and oppressive practices against Palestinians whom it depicts as homophobic.<sup>24</sup> As Maikey says, “We witness the pinkwashing of the apartheid wall, which becomes a wall to protect Israel from a ‘homophobic’ attack. At the same time, calls are made for putting an end to the support of Palestinians because they are not ‘LGBT-friendly.’”<sup>25</sup>

In pointing out the exclusivist character of Israel’s LGBT rights agenda and challenging pinkwashing as another tactic in the Zionist settler-colonial arsenal, alQaws activists uncover the racist and anti-Arab underpinnings of the practice/discourse—or, as Maikey says, “the fact that racism already exists in the room.”<sup>26</sup> In so doing, alQaws exposes the prevalence of the racialized worldview that informs Israeli social life, which divides the world into binaries of civilized versus uncivilized, pride versus homophobia, democracy versus terror. alQaws’s decolonial queering work reveals how these discourses of sexual progress reproduce Zionist colonialism and thereby demonstrates how deeply politicized LGBT Israeli organizations are, regardless of their self-definition as apolitical.

An emblematic example of alQaws’s efforts, widely known as *pinkwatching* Israel,<sup>27</sup> took place at the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2015.<sup>28</sup> Following a panel questioning the myth of Israeli innocence and normalcy, a member of the audience, who self-identified as Israeli, stated, “Israel has the right to promote its image and be proud of being open, just like any other country would promote itself . . . Why should there be anything wrong with that?!”<sup>29</sup> alQaws activist and panel member Omar Khoury pointed out that Israel was “not like any other normal country . . . because its branding campaign always relies on proliferating certain images and narratives of the Palestinians.”<sup>30</sup> Another instance of dichotomous framing can also be seen in an interview segment by the U.S.-based news outlet Democracy Now! On the fourth day of Israel’s summer 2014 onslaught against Gaza (code-named Operation Protective Edge), Palestinian human rights attorney and scholar Noura Erakat and Joshua Hantman, a senior adviser to Israel’s ambassador to the United States and former spokesperson for the Israeli ministry of defense, each speak about the attack. While Erakat emphasizes that Israeli atrocities in Gaza follow from “the structural violence of occupation, of apartheid, and of settler colonialism,” Hantman accuses Erakat of defending Hamas, who “wouldn’t allow my gay friends to express their sexuality freely.”<sup>31</sup>

## International Aid and the Neoliberal Instrumentalization of LGBT Rights

alQaws’s efforts also address the role of international assistance in cementing the pinkwashing practices referenced above. In 1993, Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization signed the Declaration of Principles, the first of the two Oslo Accords. The agreement held out the promise of peace and fueled expectations for the establishment of a Palestinian state. It ushered in a deluge of international assistance premised on a linear view that peace would lead to security and reward

Palestinians with “development.” Focused on postconflict scenarios and the Palestinian state-building enterprise, international aid providers disregarded the facts on the ground that Oslo only exacerbated: the continued expansion of settlements and dispossession of Palestinians as a result of occupation, annexation, and criminalization.<sup>32</sup> Ignoring Israel’s expansionist policies as well as the structural flaws inherent to Oslo served to further entrench the settler-colonial project.<sup>33</sup> The Oslo agenda structured foreign aid directed to Palestinian civil society in such a way as to require recipients, both NGOs and grassroots groups, to undertake what Tariq Dana has described as “predefined tasks in service of the ‘peace process’” generating almost-total dependency.<sup>34</sup> As Dana goes on to say, “major political assignments previously associated with the dynamics of anti-colonial struggle” were replaced “with ostensibly apolitical approaches based on the politics of peacebuilding.”<sup>35</sup> As international donors sought to fund activities deemed crucial to state building in post-conflict societies,<sup>36</sup> they widened the scope of their interest to human rights and, particularly, to sexuality rights, further shaping the course of “development” in the Palestinian context.

The colonizer’s standards and achievements became the yardstick by which the colonized were measured and to which they had to conform. At the same time, no mention was made of the fact that anti-sodomy laws had been removed from the Jordanian Penal Code—which the PA had inherited—in 1957.<sup>37</sup> The logic of “development” and “peace” thus demanded of the Palestinians that they look to their colonizers as role models rather than engage in decolonization. As alQaws member Ghaith Hilal explains, potential donors talked about Palestine’s “gay scenery,” urging that Ramallah become more like Tel Aviv.<sup>38</sup> Erasing the colonial violence that facilitated the creation and existence of that city, the donor narrative held up Tel Aviv as an example of the threshold of development to which Palestinians should aspire. In brief, the development discourse whitewashed the reality of colonialism that is central to Tel Aviv’s identity. Moreover, such comparisons signaled the fragmentation of Palestinian spaces, reinforcing a growing binary between, for instance, Ramallah and Gaza.<sup>39</sup> alQaws members also draw attention to the kinds of statements Israeli officials make in response to Palestinian and international criticism of Israeli actions such as the repeated brutal onslaughts against Gaza. As noted earlier, such condemnation is often met with retorts in the vein of “Let’s wait till you have gay parades in Gaza.”<sup>40</sup>

Decolonial queering troubles normalized perceptions of progress as they relate to LGBT rights in Palestine. It questions and challenges the internationalization of Western LGBT approaches that are founded in notions of pride, visibility, and homophobia. For “those riding the wave of fighting homophobia,” decolonial queering further deconstructs the duality of “the West and the rest” on which the whole notion of progress is based.<sup>41</sup> As Maikey and Shamali write, while the United States imposes love of gayness and democracy on Iraq’s allegedly homophobic people, Israel uses the same discourse to whitewash its own crimes.<sup>42</sup> By highlighting the limitations of mainstream Western LGBT approaches in the context of Palestine, alQaws’s decolonial queering unmasks the epistemic violence implicit in the depiction of homophobia as “the specific property of Arab/Muslim society.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, it reveals how the logic of development legitimates the ontological violence of the Israeli colonial order, which promotes itself as a civilizing enterprise spreading democracy where it is otherwise deemed lacking.<sup>44</sup> This logic also informs a large majority of international assistance/aid directed toward “development” and “peacebuilding,” which enforces and whitewashes colonizing hierarchies using the lexicon of progress and democracy. Pondering

its response to hegemonic international investments to combat homophobia and spread LGBT rights, alQaws draws on the specificity of what it calls “our local context”:

How can we frame our struggle as against homophobia when we live in a society that does not publicly discuss sexuality? Are pride parades the ultimate celebration of freedom and visibility in a context where millions of Palestinians have no access to water, health care, mobility, work, etc.? How can we understand individual visibility in a family-based society? Is coming out, as understood and practiced in the West, a crucial step for a healthy and open life? What are the means to achieve an open and healthy life for LGBT people whose bodies, minds and reality [are] colonised?<sup>45</sup>

Fundamental to alQaws’s mission is its dedication to working throughout what it identifies as *historic Palestine*, that is, in both the oPt and inside Israel proper. As a result, the organization has a presence in Haifa and Jaffa, but it also functions in East Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Bayt Jala (in the oPt). Bringing together LGBT communities from both sides of the Green Line<sup>46</sup> demonstrates alQaws’s commitment to transcending Israel’s colonial fragmentation and rejecting the politics of international assistance that reifies that fragmentation. That notwithstanding, alQaws also takes seriously these varied classifications of Palestinian identity, and the consequent division and ghettoization of Palestinians. As one of their members, Muhammad Halim, explains: “This does not mean that alQaws fails to acknowledge the material impact of these divisions, including the legal statuses under which different communities live, as well as the degree of deterrence these barriers impose on a lot of the work, especially the inability to reach out to Gaza, for instance.”<sup>47</sup> The organization’s spaces allow and enable a conjoining of Palestinian identities,<sup>48</sup> be they “48-ers” (that is, those Palestinians that remained inside Israel’s still-undeclared borders after 1948), East Jerusalemites, or West Bankers. This capacity to both recognize and overcome divisions and separations further demonstrate the potential of decolonial queering.

## Striving for Decolonial Modes of Being

One important tactic of alQaws’s decolonial queering politics is to challenge normalized connections to pinkwashed spaces. alQaws’s pinkwashing activism exposes the ways in which the progress/pride-in-LGBT-rights discourse reifies a colonizing mode of being, reproducing a universalized temporality (the notion of progress) that is an essential means of othering. Therefore, the very task of unmasking Israeli pinkwashing narratives and their implicit underlying notions of timeless universality is an integral element of the struggle for decolonial modes of being.

The call to boycott Tel Aviv Pride 2016 and Israeli gay tourism,<sup>49</sup> together with the rejection of the discourses connecting Palestinian queers to the pinkwashed city of Tel Aviv, are strategies that alQaws deploys to oppose Israeli colonialism. They are forms of activism whose queerness, as Muñoz also writes, desires “another way of being in the world and time,”<sup>50</sup> and strives for a different way of being. As part of their Boycott Tel Aviv Pride 2016 campaign, for example, alQaws activists and international allies released a video in which the statement, “Sunbathe at the gay beach and spend the night in luxurious boutique hotels built on the ruins of ethnically cleansed Palestinian villages,” is followed by the question “Why are you proud of Tel Aviv?”<sup>51</sup>



Anti-pinkwashing activism highlights the problematic discourses on gay rights as celebrated in pinkwashed spaces such as Tel Aviv while simultaneously laying bare the historical violence that has been “anesthetized” from the consciousness of those espousing progressive gay rights.<sup>52</sup> Pinkwashing discloses what has been obfuscated in the promotion of Tel Aviv as a top gay destination, whose pride brochures and touristic guides fail to mention that the city “is also an hour away from the world’s largest open prison, Gaza, and it is built on stolen land. They forget to mention that the gay soldiers you dance with in the pride parade check, arrest, and kill Palestinians on a daily basis.”<sup>53</sup>

alQaws’s decolonial activism is also seen at work in its call for the global boycott of the Israeli state. An important aspect of that call is the *anti-normalization* campaign, which also spills over into the international aid sphere.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, alQaws refuses to “work [either] directly with Israeli organizations or those international bodies who do not uphold an anti-normalization stance.”<sup>55</sup> Maikey put it succinctly in a Facebook post in 2013: “The definition of ‘Pride’: never went to, and never will attend the TLV [Tel Aviv] Pride.”<sup>56</sup> Such political (op)positionality grounds queerness in an understanding of decolonization that signals the refusal to settle for a narrow framework of disidentification.<sup>57</sup> While the logic of queer disidentification aims to avoid the “trap of assimilation or adhering to different separatist or nationalist ideologies,”<sup>58</sup> alQaws’s politics highlights the necessity of *counteridentification*.<sup>59</sup> It is through the latter lens that alQaws’s work troubles normalized public perceptions of the Israeli state and its gay-friendly image: in other words, alQaws positions itself in relation to *Palestine* in order not to turn Palestinians into an accepted minority. Instead, it challenges the very nature of the colonial power structures underlying Israel’s branding campaigns. The organization’s aim is not to “carve out a minority”<sup>60</sup> within the Israeli state but to continually question “the givenness”<sup>61</sup> of that state, interrupting its presumed right to continue to exist as any other normal state.

The relevance of pinkwashing also emerges in relation to what I will call the colonial savior fantasy, after alQaws’s own usage. In addition to deploying modern/democratic-versus-traditional/homophobic tropes, pinkwashing narratives also propagate the notion of the colonial savior, depicting Israel as the gay refuge that will save LGBT Palestinians from their own homophobic/backward society. As Hilal says, “Israel uses narratives of progress and its self-image as a gay haven and a democracy to persuade LGBT Palestinians that they will always be victims of our ‘homophobic societies’ and that neither alQaws nor our communities can accommodate our needs.”<sup>62</sup> The savior fantasy enforces a victimhood positionality for LGBT Palestinians, who, deprived of agency, must look to Israel since their needs cannot be accommodated in their own society.<sup>63</sup> The following example serves as an illustration: after the incident in 2014 when Israeli settlers kidnapped and burned alive Jerusalem teenager Mohammed Abu Khdeir, a story began to circulate in some Israeli circles that Mohammed had been killed by his family because he was gay.<sup>64</sup> As Maikey suggests, this episode confirms the violence perpetuated by the pinkwashing narrative from an ostensibly progressive stance, whereby Israel is saving “Palestinian gays from a society that otherwise kills them.”<sup>65</sup> When Israelis describe Palestinian death within the framework of honor culture as an entrenched value, they negate the colonial structure of Israeli violence and thereby recolonize Palestinians. The trope that constructs Palestinian death by virtue of the so-called honor culture reenacts the same deadly violence that the settler-colonial entity



exercises against Palestinians. alQaws challenges “the chiding discourse to recolonize our bodies by implicitly suggesting that queer Palestinians look to Israel as our saviour.”<sup>66</sup> Decolonial queering, therefore, rejects singling out sexuality as a discrete site of oppression disconnected from the power structure of settler colonialism. And it provides the agency that the colonial savior fantasy denies it.

In its portrayal of the (gay) Palestinian as the victim of an oppressive (honor culture) society, pinkwashing becomes a form of colonial ga(y)zing that fixes onto the Other their reality in relation to homophobia and death, to which Israel/colonialism stands as a remedy. In returning that gaze, pinkwatching echoes the queer ontological condition of present-absent Palestinians<sup>67</sup> because it *troubles more than represents* the logic of identifications through which a savior-self construes its victim (gay) other.<sup>68</sup> As alQaws activists often assert, “representing Palestinian gays is not our mission.”<sup>69</sup> The group invites all Palestinians, whether “gay” identifying or not, to take part in its events. Thus, another fundamental aim of the politics of decolonial queering is to dismantle normative discourses and colonial regimes of power that set the parameters for imagining Palestinian *gay* subjectivity in the first place.<sup>70</sup>

The present-absent positionality that the Palestinian pinkwatcher occupies challenges the arguments that reduce pinkwatching to an identitarian—meaning homonationalist—dynamic. In their important *Jadaliyya* article in 2012, Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi stated that “pinkwashing and pinkwatching speak the language of homonationalism. One does so in the name of Israel, the other does so in the name of Palestine.”<sup>71</sup> Drawing on Puar’s theory of homonationalism, they argued that pinkwatching becomes a venue that consolidates Palestinian gay identities and thus reproduces the logic of the pinkwashing narrative in reverse. While the latter promotes gay identities affiliated with the Israeli state, the former operates from the opposite side of the spectrum, promoting gay identities for Palestine. However, even though homonationalism investigates how queer participates in dominant power structures (nationalism/imperialism), it fails to take into account what meanings queer assumes from the standpoint of native, queered positionality, and grassroots work.<sup>72</sup> As a result, it fails to capture the relevance of decolonial queering politics and locks pinkwatching work within the very same terrain of power that homonationalism critiques. As such, it “obscures specific, politically relevant features of pinkwatching activism that are particular to Palestine and Palestine solidarity work.”<sup>73</sup>

The Puar-Mikdashi perspective ignores alQaws’s own self-definition as an initiative that encompasses the entirety of historic Palestine or, as Maikey describes it, “a national queer movement” that extends to every corner of Palestinian territory.<sup>74</sup> Such an identification allows alQaws to project a unified nation/notion of Palestine against the Israeli settler-colonial order and its geography of dispossession and fragmentation. Reducing pinkwatching to a kind of obverse image of pinkwashing negates alQaws’s very deliberate strategy. More specifically, an *anti-national* conceptual approach overlooks the centrality of nationalist struggles to anti-colonial resistance from the standpoint of native people.<sup>75</sup> Thus, decolonial queering complicates queerness as defined and evaluated solely through the lens of an anti-national stance. In addition to positioning queer within a unified notion of home and nation, alQaws also dares to imagine Palestine otherwise.

## Imagining an Otherwise to a Heteronormative Reproduction of Palestine

Can we create a space to imagine [something] beyond the logic of my father wants to kill me  
[and] Israel is a democracy?  
— Field notes, December 2015

During a three-day academic workshop titled “Sexual Politics in the Colonial Context of Palestine,”<sup>76</sup> organized by alQaws in the town of Bayt Jala, Maikey reflected on the ways that queer activists and their allies have internalized the logic of the pinkwashing discourse. Questioning the status of the Palestinian liberation struggle and its transformation into a state-building enterprise, Maikey reflected on the possibility of *imagining otherwise* in those spaces that alQaws strives to create. Decolonial queering politics are important, she argued, because of their ability to critically connect historical events with the geopolitical power structures and processes of gendering that have defined Palestinian nationalism and its visions of a free Palestine.

Similarly to other anti-colonial and liberation movements, the Palestinian national movement’s discourse is pervaded by narratives of heroism. These celebrate the fedayee’s martyrdom (death in struggle) as an act of self-sacrifice signifying both rebirth and agency.<sup>77</sup> In particular, such narratives highlight the figure of the hero and his masculine duty to defend the “motherland.” The communiqués of the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) published during the First Intifada provide a telling example.<sup>78</sup> UNLU statements generally follow the same pattern, with the masculine agent producing the nation, and the nation’s symbols cast in terms of a female guardian. In this paradigm, liberation is signified as a woman who needs protection from colonial penetration. Communiqué 29, for example, describes the motherland giving birth to the national hero as “she rejoices twice: first on the day of her son’s death and again on the day of the declaration of the state.”<sup>79</sup> These statements also “congratulate” Palestinian women on their role as the mothers and birthers of the nation, and urge their nationalist “sons” to launch the revolution and realize the nation’s glory and dignity by their death.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the intifada is described as a pregnancy, “the colonizer’s attempt to suppress it, is [termed] an ‘abortion,’”<sup>81</sup> and the colonization of Palestine is widely referred to as the “rape” of the land.<sup>82</sup> The intifada is also likened to a wedding (*urs al-intifada*) whose anniversary continues to be celebrated. Seen from that prism, liberation becomes a celebration of an act of heterosexual consummation that brings forth the “children of the revolution.”<sup>83</sup> While the bodies of women are intertwined with the symbolic body of the nation because “it is women who reproduce nations biologically, culturally and symbolically,”<sup>84</sup> the agency to enact such (re)production remains a masculine privilege.

In the Palestinian setting, where images of unadulterated heteromascularity symbolize the struggle for liberation, a large segment of society associates homosexuality with collaborationism, and thus the (dis)honor of the nation. At the same time, individuals involved in socially stigmatized activities—whether homosexuality, premarital sex, prostitution, or drug use—become the perfect target for blackmail and recruitment as informants by the Israeli authorities, leading to their further stigmatization and to their disqualification from the nationalist struggle by the political leadership. This particular dynamic was exacerbated as Palestinian leaders began

adopting so-called *cleansing strategies*—measures to identify and uproot conduct deemed immoral and deviant, targeting suspected homosexuals and drug users—in the West Bank during the period between the two intifadas (1990–2000). I contend that the same geopolitical power dynamics that breathed life into the Oslo process also informed these so-called cleansing strategies, yielding the nationalist agent who is both masculine and “bourgeois-in-the-making.”<sup>85</sup> By this I mean that the gains attributed to the diaspora-based elite with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) were consolidated with the help of international assistance. Major European countries and the United States invested in the PA’s security establishment and its terror deterrence agenda in the years following the Second Intifada to suppress the activities of militant (anti-colonial) groups, particularly after Hamas threatened PA hegemony in the wake of its 2006 electoral victory. Taken together, those forces have given rise to what Tariq Dana has called “the new Palestinian Man,” one professionally trained to be “in the service of the new U.S. and Israeli security.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, the state-building project, enshrined in a neoliberal agenda and buttressed by securitization, has given birth to a new form of Palestinian identity with its own web of desires and future aspirations, particularly within the hub of central authority, Ramallah. Those aspirations for the “good life” include the successful Palestinian entrepreneur and the “happy” middle-class nuclear family portrayed on billboards promoting housing loans in Ramallah.<sup>87</sup>

Against this backdrop, the politics of decolonial queering invite Palestinian society as a whole to address the violence against those bodies whose gender identifications and desires trouble such structural notions of Palestinian identity.<sup>88</sup> Decolonial queering provides room for gender and sexual performances that *disidentify* with the dominant gendered paradigms enshrined in Palestinian nationalist thought. On the one hand, performativity explains how social norms emerge from a repetition and reiteration of certain acts, which (re)produce dominant power structures. On the other hand, it identifies how potentialities and possibilities for re-signification of those dominant norms lie within their performative repetition. As Judith Butler suggests, “Possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat in ‘proper’ terms the gendered identity ascribed to us.”<sup>89</sup> alQaws offers venues to Palestinians with diverse gender and sexual experiences in which they can articulate such disidentification. These include alKhat “listening and information” hotline, run by a group of alQaws volunteers since 2012, and youth groups in various locations that offer individuals a forum to explore their sexualities and connect their lived experiences to the local context by emphasizing oppressive social constructs and participants’ personal/collective strategies of resilience.<sup>90</sup> alQaws also organizes monthly queer parties, which bring together friends, activists, and organization members to dance, perform drag, and celebrate queerness in Palestine. All these initiatives reflect an investment in what I call interior spaces. They are material examples of alQaws’s ability to construct alternative and locally informed strategies based on its radical questioning of tactics centered on visibility and coming out. In that they foster networks of kinship and support, such initiatives can be seen as homemaking spaces that challenge Palestinian fragmentation within geopolitical and gendered hierarchies.

alQaws’s activities, tactics, and initiatives represent a call for imagining an otherwise vis-à-vis Palestine by relying on aspects of the intersectionality that native struggles for sovereignty require. Struggles for sovereignty and liberation often dictate a hierarchy that marks indigenous queer

and/or feminist organizing as a *divergence* from the main issue—meaning, national liberation must come first. Such calls for “purity” function as forms of “political silencing” of queer and native feminists that leave the indigenous neocolonial elite unchallenged.<sup>91</sup> The politics of decolonial queering contest decolonizing projects that succumb to such hierarchal structures, and question the heteropatriarchal structure of the nation-statist model.<sup>92</sup> To center gender and sexuality issues in the struggle for liberation is to inspire imaginings of decolonization beyond the power paradigms that only serve to reaffirm colonial heteronormativity.<sup>93</sup>

## Paving the Way for Decolonial Queer Beginnings

In its quest to imagine an otherwise that troubles normative regimens, queering paves the way to think and practice decolonization in new ways.<sup>94</sup> Via an exploration of alQaws and its interactions with local and international forces, as well as the intertwinement of the two, I have tried to highlight the political valence of being queer in Palestine.

Being queer in Palestine involves confronting multiple formations of power, and alQaws’s work is one prism through which to apprehend the ways that international development and assistance agendas often camouflage and normalize Israeli colonial violence. These hegemonic projects have a tendency to enforce and fund mainstream single-issue approaches to queer organizing, imposing top-down solutions that have little relevance for Palestinian activists. The significance of decolonial queering lies in its ability to trace the heteronormative structures of Israeli colonialism and their reproduction within dominant Palestinian imaginings of liberation. Decolonial queering assesses critically the premise of state building that tethers the outcome of liberation to the very gendered and geopolitical structures that enable Palestinian subjugation and ongoing fragmentation.

The interaction between decolonization and queer calls into question scholarly accounts on Palestine and/or queer that do not pose this interaction as the starting point of their analysis.<sup>95</sup> For instance, the work of alQaws challenges reductive approaches that relegate queer to a Western colonial epistemological construct. Such a framing is part of a knowledge/power system that reinforces the supposed universality of a Western regime of hetero/homo dualism and that dismisses both the nuances and specificities of other contexts. Such an approach falls short of realizing what Butler calls a conceptualization of sexuality politics as “a fractious constellation” where the dominant progressive narrative is “but one strand within that constellation.”<sup>96</sup> To read queer from within the localized experiences of those involved is a necessary task for revealing other narratives within that constellation, and thus a step towards decentering Western sexualities.<sup>97</sup>

Palestinian decolonial queerness is but a gesture towards future beginnings. It not only allows us to engage queer as a site for methodological and analytical frameworks that are significant to the study of the Middle East as a region, but it also deepens the analysis of decolonial queer politics and practices elsewhere.<sup>98</sup> This article is one node in a larger web of work by activists/academics/artists who are committed to imagining the value of decolonial queering within transnational settler-colonial and/or post-colonial contexts. In their *Queer Indigenous Studies*, Driskill and others emphasize the importance of *imagining* queer in relation to the subject position, context, and history of those who remain directly under the thumb of settler-colonial violence.<sup>99</sup> Thus,

bringing queerness into conversation with decolonization remains a necessary task as well as a challenge from which the past, present, and future can be reimagined differently.

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### ENDNOTES

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- 2 The etymology of the word *queer*, once a degrading term to describe homosexuals, is rooted in nineteenth-century Anglo-American usage. See <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/queer>. Some scholars have argued that since the term originated in Western societies, it has no relevance for other, particularly, non-English speaking contexts. See Jon Binnie, "Sexuality, the Erotic and Geography: Epistemology, Methodology, and Pedagogy" in *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, ed. Kath Browne, Jason Lim, and Gavin Brown (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), p. 35; and Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska, eds., *De-centring Western Sexualities: Central and Eastern European Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2011).
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- 4 Shimon Peres, *The New Middle East* (New York: Holt, 1993), pp. 44–50.
- 5 Mark LeVine, *Impossible Peace: Israel/Palestine since 1989* (London: Zed Books, 2009), p. 54. See also Leila Farsakh, "Undermining Democracy in Palestine: The Politics of International Aid since Oslo," *JPS* 45, no. 4 (2016): pp. 48–63; Sean F. McMahon, "Temporality, Peace Initiatives and Palestinian-Israeli Politics," *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 1 (2016): pp. 5–21.
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- 12 Ghaith Hilal (alQaws member), author interview via Skype, 18 February 2015.
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- 15 Hilal, interview, 18 February 2015.

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- 53 "Boycott Tel Aviv Pride 2016," alQaws.
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