

Geopolitics Alert!

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What a scribble, these questions on your sheet:

Do you also spin the threads of nations?

—Agha Shahid Ali, “A Fate’s Brief Memoir”

For the past two years I have worked with a dynamic group of interdisciplinary and transnational feminist scholars on a collaborative project whose working title is “Feminisms, Geopolitics, and Sexuality.” Central to our critical and political project is the understanding that the intersectionality of gender and sexuality is not only crucial to but a function of geopolitical formations. Through this project my colleagues and I are attempting to thicken current analyses of geopolitics, variously understood through rubrics such as transnational, international, global, and diasporic, to argue for an epistemological and activist conversation that places discourses of sexuality alongside locations of social struggles and state formations. While the project was conceptualized prior to the events of September 11, 2001, its current formulations clearly reflect on and engage with feminist implications of the ongoing war against “terrorism.” Our continued desire has been to foreground feminist analyses of sociohistorical, cultural, and geopolitical conditions to make visible alternative strategies of intervention derived from alternative conceptualizations of problems for which violence is now considered a necessary solution. The participants in this project come from South Asian, Pacific Rim, and Southeast Asian studies, African legal and cultural studies, and Latin American anthropology. The questions we ask include the following: What new knowledges of genders and sexualities are being forged within differing interpretive communities in our contemporary climate? What are the links between colonial models of area-studies scholarship and the new global order, including the patterns of under- and overattention that privilege Arab countries and yet ignore Africa? What epistemological concerns emerge from the production of research practices and policy agendas around the study of gender and sexuality dynamics in Central Asian contexts?¹

I begin with an invocation of this project because its critical energies and struggles articulate, for me, some of the key debates and lacunae in current theorizations of gender and sexuality. The aim of my brief meditation here is to propose that we vigilantly interrogate the labor of geopolitics in the study of gender and sexuality. Such an exercise will go beyond the familiar rehearsal of dilemmas around incommensurability, cross-cultural comparison, translation, and the impos-

sibilities of understanding and will take seriously the genealogical peculiarities that the recent turn to geopolitics brings. Just as critics such as Rachel Lee and Minoo Moallem have powerfully argued that the project of “women of color” and/or race has emerged as a pedagogical and intellectual corrective to the flawed past of women’s studies, I want to argue that the project of geopolitics in all its avatars has emerged to play a similarly redemptive role in the new formations of queer scholarship.² My goal here is not to equate the overinvestment of women’s studies in the project of women of color with queer scholarship’s overinvestment in the discourse of geopolitics, but to foreground patterns of epistemological recuperation and redemption in two related sites of intellectual exploration.³

More precisely, what I want to suggest is that the current representational field of geopolitics, its complications notwithstanding, functions as a vexed, theoretical antidote to earlier models of a flawed, colonial geography of perversions. Such models, largely derivative of discourses of colonial anthropology, literature, sexology, and law, have been powerfully debunked and reassessed by scholars of colonialism(s) such as Ann Stoler, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Anne McClintock. We have also seen a concurrent outpouring of rich scholarship on “queer globalization,” cross-cultural ethnographies of sexual cultures in a vast range of non-U.S. sites, all of which have troubled the portability of gender and sexuality as stable analytic registers across geopolitical sites.⁴ This new scholarship certainly attempts to avoid the facile additive approach of piling differentiated sexual minorities from different regions onto its analysis as a gesture of its transnational approach. However, even as new versions of relationalities in, between, and among cultures, ethnicities, and nations emerge, we appear to reproduce methodologically what Joan Wallach Scott refers to as analytic echoes—mutable conceptual modes that are not just “distorted repetitions, but movements in space and time-history” that produce violent reverberations even as they suggest polysemic epicenters of knowledge and transformation.⁵ One way to trace such analytic echoes would be to reflect on what gets recognized within the grid of geopolitics and what gets disappeared within such formulations. There are other questions worth considering: Which epistemological structures benefit from such shifts to a transnational critical framework? How does the emergent work on sexuality studies translate into models for workable coalitions in non-U.S. contexts? What role (if any) do non-Western theories of racial formations play in the turn to geopolitical rubrics?

To situate my claims more substantially, I want to turn to my own pedagogical experiences as one location in which such vexations around geopolitics repeatedly emerge. For the past two years I have taught a graduate seminar at the Uni-

versity of California, Santa Cruz, on the intersectionality of queer and critical race studies. Taught the first year as “Critical Queer/Race Studies: An Introduction,” the seminar then morphed into a new critical schema, “Queer Globalizations, Racial Formations.” My attempts in both versions of the seminar were directed at producing a syllabus that reflected on and complicated the relationalities between histories of race and sexuality within the shifting critical frameworks of geopolitics, variously defined as globalization, transnationalism, diaspora studies, and so on. It has been a challenge for me to map out a syllabus that foregrounds the particularity of geopolitical terrains and their structures of sexualities alongside a sustained analysis of how the category of “race” emerges in such varied locations. In other words, because there is no other institutional location for an investigation of non-U.S. queer studies than a syllabus on queer and race studies, the onus has lain on the seminar participants to shift the production of categories of “race” as emanating solely from the United States and Europe to thinking of them as emergent and embedded in what we postulate as the non-West or other. That India, Brazil, and Mexico, on the one hand, and the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States, on the other, are not race-d in the same ways does not mean that they are not race-d in any way.

I myself work on the history of sexuality in colonial India and have thus used the seminar as a venue in which to think through my preoccupations with those patterns and nuances of colonial rule that were at once particular to a time and place (colonial India, for instance) but are also differently resonant with colonial and postcolonial contexts in a wider comparative and global field. The seminar offers a localized, historical genealogy of the emergence of categories of sexual perversions in discourses of colonial and postcolonial rule, but it also critically thinks through contemporary debates on the intersections of race and sexuality in area studies and queer studies. Each section of my syllabus is organized around the formation of one central disciplinary discourse for regulating sexual perversions—namely, literature, anthropology, science, and law—and considers the emergence of categories of sexual perversion under different evidentiary patterns, at different historical moments, in different locales.

The graduate students in my seminars are largely from UCSC’s History of Consciousness Program and thus are almost too eager to think against the grain of disciplines and epistemologies. One stumbling block, however, continually trips up our analytic explorations: the question of race as a grid of intelligibility in non-U.S. sites. An implicit and sometimes invisible U.S. nationalism undergirds most discussions on racial formations, with students struggling even to imagine race,

not simply as a racist practice but as a form of historical analysis as varied and slippery as the multiple geographic locations they are keen to study. The special issue of *GLQ* on transnationalism a few years ago highlighted this point unwittingly, as its table of contents reflects just such multiple stresses in places as varied as China, Puerto Rico, and Brazil.⁶ There was much debate in this issue about the cultural implications and translations of queer methodologies and concepts in these different sites, but little about how local discourses of “race” qua “race” intersect with these questions. Hence the challenge for my seminar is how to initiate interrogations of geopolitics and sexuality without disappearing questions of race, or rather, without making geopolitics interchangeable with the category of race.

I have made some rather hazardous generalizations to set up the question of foreign bodies in foreign landscapes as lodged somewhere in the interstices of these formulations on geopolitics and sexuality. One could, for instance, argue that the very category of “race” as understood within U.S. frameworks appears coercive and loses critical purchase when applied to queer movements in locations like India. Take the Campaign for Lesbian Rights in India. Drafted in 1999 following the outrage caused by the shutdown of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* in India, this charter goes to great lengths to position itself alongside emergent and existing queer movements globally. It emphasizes issues of oppression, solidarity, and equal rights, conjoining the identity of lesbians, among other groups, with the identity of certain religious minorities in India. Here the lexicon of racial formation is necessarily linked to multiple lexicons of religion, caste, and even literacy, making it a consideration for any geopolitical “reality tour” of the sexual cultures of India. Our goal as queer scholars and teachers is to make sexuality studies vigilantly intimate with precisely such work on race and colonialism, simultaneously disrupting and working within disciplinary and intellectual forces that would confine geopolitics and race to separate spheres.

Notes

1. I am particularly grateful to Paola Bacchetta, Gina Dent, Geeta Patel, and Neferti Tadiar for many productive conversations on this subject. A more formal version of these conversations took place at an international workshop, “Gendered Bodies, Transnational Politics: Modernities Reconsidered,” in Cairo, December 12–14, 2003.
2. Rachel Lee, “Notes from the (Non)field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color,” *Meridians* 1 (2000): 85–109.

3. For a more nuanced discussion of the perils of such disciplinary erasures see Miranda Joseph, "Analogy and Complicity: Women's Studies, Lesbian/Gay Studies, and Capitalism," in *Women's Studies on Its Own: A Next Wave Reader in Institutional Change*, ed. Robyn Wiegman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 267–92.
4. For instance, see the excellent collection *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
5. Joan Wallach Scott, "Feminist Reverberations," *differences* 13, no. 3 (2002): 11.
6. Elizabeth A. Povinelli and George Chauncey, eds., "Thinking Sexuality Transnationally," special issue, *GLQ* 5, no. 4 (1999).

Transecting the Academy

Dean Spade and Sel Wahng

The identity politics that underwrite many gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender discourses have proved limiting in regard to potential political alliances and social change. We address this concern by looking at the questions under consideration in this forum through a particular lens: how bodies and identities interact and intersect with modern formations of power. Through this mode of inquiry we seek to relate supposedly disparate elements for the purpose of making new social, political, and scholarly connections and transformations.

Modern Formations of Power

Dean: For me, any answer to questions about the interrelation or separation of the study of sex, sexuality, gender, and gender identity has to start with my purpose for engaging in careful analysis about these topics to begin with. That purpose is to enable an understanding of the operation of coercive and violent systems that determine and prescribe sex, sexual practices, and gender identities and expressions for everyone. My motivation for understanding the relation between sexuality and gender, then, is to destroy that coercion, end that violence, and enable all people to determine their own sex, sexual practices, and gender identity and expression. I do not envision self-determination as the ability to express a natural, essential, preexisting or inherent sex, sexual desire, or gender identity or expression. Rather, self-determination is a means of making room for all people to navigate the complex and overlapping constructions of sexual identity, gender identity, sexual behavior, and gender expression with which we all must contend in whatever ways make the most sense to us. It is a way to end the mechanisms of coercion that