

Book Review Symposium – Queer Geographies

Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-4780-0035-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-0028-0 (cloth)

In *Unruly Visions*, renowned cultural studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath extends her work on “queer diaspora” to suggest “alternative understandings of time, space, and relationality that are obscured within dominant history” (p.5). The author interprets visual artworks, including painting, film, and photography, as “the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora” (p.6). In her well-regarded 2005 book, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gopinath developed the concept of queer diaspora, looking at the movement of queer/deviant people who challenge conventional articulations of diaspora and nation spatially and temporally. Now, she aims to examine how the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora specifically dismantle modernistic normativities, turning her focus to “‘minor’ sites and locations of ... the historical and epistemic formation of queer diaspora” (pp.6-7) as queer people move within the nation-state and over the national borders.

Drawing on queer subjectless critique, Gopinath asserts that modernistic normativities can be specified in two forms. First, the nation-state embodies modernism as it enforces “normal” standards and excludes diverse “others” who are not consistent with its internal orders. Second, capitalistic normativity is evidenced in the forces (heteropatriarchy, transphobia, racism, ableism, xenophobia, and so on) that shape our lives into certain, narrow ways and patterns. Queer diaspora is a path through which to deconstruct the nation-state and hierarchical relation between center and periphery, and it is revealed in the form of queer aesthetic practices. In other words, the characters of modernist normativity – boundary, hierarchy, centrality, and

homogeneous history – can be dismantled and reinterpreted by queer diaspora in aesthetic practices.

Gopinath devotes most of the book to thinking through the spatiotemporalities of the scale of the region. She argues that subnational regions are antithetical to the nation-state because these regions – and the migrants who move through and around them – are places of deviation from nation-state norms and, thus, a central source of the queer diaspora. Thus, to emphasize regions – as both a scale and a field of queer diaspora – means dismantling the nation-state itself. Further, supranational connections between regions challenge the totalizing effect of the nation-state and its undergirding colonialism as well because it transgresses the boundary and system of the nation-state.

In her first chapter, “Queer Regions: Imagining Kerala from the Diaspora”, she shows how the regional perspective disrupts the colonial and national force of the territory of the nation-state through an analysis of Ligy Pullappally’s 2004 film, *The Journey (Sancharram)*. She argues that this film, about a young woman in a small rural town who embarks on a journey away from her family to refute oppressive sexual ideologies, shows “how the region in its subnational sense ... disorients conventional framings of both queerness and region” (p.55). She then examines Aurora Guerrero’s 2012 film *Mosquita y Mari*, which is about two queer female, US immigrants whose “queer genealogy is routed in and through” the less well-known and heteronormative place of Xalapa, Mexico (p.84). Such a queer genealogy makes the homonormativity of the United States unstable and therefore the nation-state itself unstable. She describes the film as a site “just west of [the] East L.A”, (p.77) immigrant landscape, a place “for a radical repudiation of the developmental logic of gay and immigrant ‘good life’ narratives” (p.76) that are offered by the US nation-state.

Queer diaspora, as per Gopinath, creates fractures in homogeneous capitalistic normativities by infusing queerness so that capitalism itself is questioned and challenged by queer diaspora as well. The aesthetic practices of *Mosquita y Mari* – that depicts the friendship and queer desire between two Mexican immigrant adolescent girls who search another path for

their lives – produce a queerness that “allows for an alternative form of suspension that resists the forward and upward directionality of normative visions of aspirational success” (p.82) as well as “hetero- and homonormative paths to upward mobility” (p.84). That is, Gopinath posts “suspension” as an act of queerness, a way to resist against capitalistic and normative success of immigrants through “another pathway” (p.82).

Similarly, she draws on Seher Shah’s 2011 painting, “Object Relic” to deconstruct Le Corbusier’s modernistic architectural project. This artwork transforms Le Corbusier’s already minimal buildings into their most minimal forms – squares, rectangles, triangles, etc. – and portrays them with a solid black trapezoidal shapes. Drawing on Shah’s artwork, Gopinath argues that capitalistic, modernistic modes of life, such as highly organized housing projects and heteropatriarchal nuclear families, are to be decentered if not dismantled. She says that Shah’s image reveals that the “ideal inhabitants” of Le Corbusier’s vision of society partake in a homogeneous and sedentary mode of life, both on their own and driven by his construction. Thus, Gopinath argues that these same “ideal” bodies would be rendered futile and nomadic by its deconstruction in Shah’s alternative vision (p.105).

Gopinath’s arguments are complicated but elegant and powerful. Although she emphasizes the scale and concept of region, she offers an important approach and important contributions. She moves back and forth in the imperial nation-states as well as Global South to challenge Western modernistic normativities. The geographical and cultural background of the artworks and artists she deals with includes South Asia, Latin America, and the United States, which effectively challenges modernistic normativities because these norms are universal oppressions around the whole world under capitalism and modern colonialism. In other words, diverse spatial and cultural backgrounds of the queer aesthetic practices effectively and specifically deconstruct grandness of modernistic normativities. The author also clearly takes postmodern and post-colonial positions, and does not excessively rely on theories; rather, she focuses on analyzing specific aesthetic practices. In the end, the text is accessible and inviting to advanced undergraduate- and graduate-level readers alike.

The social and cultural geographers, however, will have several concerns about the ways in which Gopinath – who is not a geographer – uses some important geographic concepts. The concept of region and the nation-state dichotomously in some senses, which engenders two issues. First, the region and nation-state are made to appear separate when they are bound and interdependent. Specifically, the author describes the region as an essence of queerness that is totally different from the nation-state; she defines queer regions as “where different logics of sexuality operate that may not be intelligible within a metronormative or nationalist grid of sexual subjectivity” (p.60). The second issue is that this region/nation-state binary romanticizes the region. In general, the region is regarded as a certain geographical area that has particular administrative and/or cultural sameness. In Gopinath’s critique, it is described as a shrine of queerness and a center for resistance against modern normativities. However, a region is not a utopian place or even a more egalitarian place as the author sometimes implies. This romantic image of the region not only distorts the reality of particular regions but runs the risk of producing another normativity, which posits a new hierarchy that places a priority on rural and peripheral areas against the metronormativities. At the same time, geographers who work at these scales will learn a great deal by reading Gopinath in thinking about queer subjects, queer subjectivities, and queer resistance – and they may also face a confusion that I, as someone new to queer theory and steeped in geographic thought and theory, may pick up as well. This critique is aimed not only at Gopinath; it applies to queer theory more broadly.

I found that the concept of queerness is trying to do everything. Gopinath assumes queerness as an important frame to dismantle all kinds of modernistic normativities. To Gopinath, queering involves resisting normativities of the nation-state, capitalism, and metronormativity, as well as racialization, colonialism, patriarchy, ethnic and cultural assimilation, and, of course, heterosexuality. Structural oppressions are surely bound and co-constitutive but the unique act of queering is then sometimes obscured. A quotation shows it clearly: “queerness functions throughout *Unruly Visions* as a mode of reading through which we can apprehend the intimacy of multiple historical formations (racialization, diaspora, indigeneity,

colonialism); bodies of knowledge (diaspora studies, indigenous studies, queer studies, area studies); geographical locations (regions, nations, diasporas); and temporalities (past, present, future)” (p.14). Thus, at times it reads as if queerness becomes a giant to fight against modernism and its proponents – and then I wonder if queerness itself is in danger of becoming another grand and normative discourse per se. To bring this critique back to Gopinath, as well as to queer theorists and radical and critical geographers as well: how can we deal with the grandness of the concept of queerness without losing queerness in fighting against the grandness of modern normativities?

All of these critiques aside, I deeply recommend this well-written and thought-provoking book. We can compellingly travel through the various queer artworks following Gopinath’s guide to deconstruct contemporary modern normativities, which is surely a much-needed project. Researchers of queer subjects and theory, and humanities scholars and social scientists working on issues of immigration and globalization, as well as laypersons interested in queer diaspora and queer art will enjoy this book. In the end, I found myself inspired by Gopinath to queer everything constantly, including queerness itself.

Reference

Gopinath G (2005) *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*.
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