

Book Review

Gayatri Gopinath. 2018. *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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In the study of diasporas and the aesthetic practices emerging from them, the question of identity in relation to the homeland often takes a central role. For example, in film studies, Hamid Naficy's seminal theorization of an accented cinema comes to mind. Naficy broadly generalizes the relationship between diasporic filmmakers and their practice in the following categories:

Exilic cinema is dominated by its focus on there and then in the homeland, diasporic cinema by its vertical relationship to the homeland and by its lateral relationship to the diaspora communities and experiences, and postcolonial ethnic and identity cinema by the exigencies of life here and now in the country in which the filmmakers reside. (2001, 15)

He goes on to identify an accented style as one that encompasses some or all of these tendencies. Nonetheless, his theorization of diaspora via accented cinema privileges the nation as a site for negotiating complicated identities. In this context, the work that Gayatri Gopinath does in her book *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora*, is to unsettle understandings of identity in broad nationalistic terms. By bringing queer studies to bear on questions emerging in diaspora and area studies, Gopinath signals that “queer visual aesthetic practices function simultaneously as archival practices that suggest alternative understandings of time,

space, and relationality that are obscured within dominant history” (2018, 5). In her theorization of queerness as a non-normative mode of aesthetic practice, Gopinath suggests ways in which queer studies can shed an important light on issues that may otherwise never surface if seen only from a diasporic lens. However, in doing so, at times she runs the risk of conflating vastly different ideas to the extent that her theorizations begin to fray at the edges. Nonetheless, Gopinath undertakes a formidable task of instrumentalizing queerness as a mode to address questions of identity that bring sexuality in conversation with issues of cultural, regional, and perhaps even national belongings.

The main project in *Unruly Visions* is to offer a theorization of aesthetic practices of queer diaspora which unsettles comfortable understandings of both queerness and the diasporic—particularly via a methodology which Gopinath identifies as *excavation*. In the introduction, Gopinath theorizes “queer diaspora as both a spatial and a temporal category: spatial in that it challenges the heteronormative and patrilineal underpinnings of conventional articulations of diaspora and nation, and temporal in that it reorients the traditionally backward glance of conventional articulations of diaspora, often predicated on a desire for a return to lost origins” (Gopinath 2018, 6). By examining the aesthetic practices of filmmakers, artists, poets, and writers—many of whom are part of the queer

diaspora—Gopinath demonstrates how queerness brings to the forefront issues of non-belonging often ignored by the emphasis on borders and national belongings. While this theorization could benefit from greater clarity, especially with a greater emphasis on how it relates to queer studies discourses, Gopinath nonetheless offers an expansive methodology which is particularly important to diaspora and area studies. She contends, “these aesthetic practices enact an excavation of the past through a queer optic, which allows us to apprehend bodies, desires, and affiliations rendered lost or unthinkable within normative history” (Gopinath 2018, 8). Moreover, Gopinath performs an excavation of her own by bringing together visual practices from a constellation of artists, filmmakers, writers, and poets, and constructing a timeline of her own. In some ways, this is reminiscent of Laura U. Marks’ work on intercultural cinema where she argues that “in many intercultural films and videos, the acts of excavation performed by these works is primarily deconstructive, for it is necessary to dismantle the colonial histories that frame minority stories before those stories can be told in their own terms” (2000, 25). Similarly, Gopinath examines artists who each perform their own excavation of personal and official histories through their practice, performing that very same act of dismantling which Marks terms intercultural. However, by keeping a focus on a queer optics, Gopinath extends this idea further to merge debates of queer identity politics with cultural identity politics.

In chapter one, titled “Queer Regions: Imagining Kerala from the Diaspora,” Gopinath continues to posit aesthetic practices in ways that disrupt comfortable understandings of space and time with a particular focus on the politics of the region. Here, she brings together a discussion of varied materials such as the film *The Journey* (2004) by Ligy Pullappally, paintings by the Indian master painter Raja Ravi Varma, and artwork by David Dasharat Kalal who digitally remakes and thus responds to Varma’s work. Despite the vastly different works they produce and temporalities they occupy, all of these artists are united by their relationship to Kerala. The significant contribution of this chapter therefore is in the way Gopinath addresses the politics of the region, stating “wheth-

er longed for or repudiated, desired or disavowed, diasporic evocations of the region may serve to buttress or undermine dominant narratives of national cohesion” (Gopinath 2018, 27). In this way, the region becomes a generative site from which to reclaim notions of identity and belonging that are elided by the dominant national histories. Moreover, focusing on the aesthetic practices of queer artists and filmmakers grappling with their identity in relation to the region, Gopinath argues “I use the term ‘queer regions’ in its subnational sense, then, to name the particularities of gender and sexual logics in spaces that exist in a tangential relation to the nation, but are simultaneously and irreducibly marked by complex national and global processes” (30). Kerala in particular, serves as a poignant example, as Gopinath elaborates on its subnational relationship to India as a whole. She contends that “the fact that Kerala exists as a tangential, ‘other’ space in relation to the Indian nation means that representations of a ‘queer Kerala’ never bear the burden, for better or for worse, of representing the nation as a whole” (39). This in some ways allows artists to put aside the burden of nationalistic representation, and results in practises like Kalal’s where he is able to renegotiate the colonial legacies attached to Varma’s canon. Gopinath’s own links to Kerala further exemplify, throughout this chapter, the room we must make to excavate personal narratives to better enrich our academic research and writing.

In chapter two, “Queer Disorientations, States of Suspensions,” Gopinath draws links between queerness, diaspora, and state of disorientation. This chapter particularly examines migrant identities and, ironically, offers disorientation as a guide to navigate through questions of belonging and unbelonging. Gopinath takes the notion of family as a starting point to problematize normative discourses in both gay and immigrant rights spheres. She argues that,

[I]ndeed, liberal gay and immigrant rights discourses both adhere to normative notions of the family, the home, and the child. The aesthetic practises of queer diaspora suggest a very different understanding of these formations than that which is enshrined within liberal affirmations of both gay and immigrant

rights. (62)

In this chapter, Gopinath focuses on artworks by Chitra Ganesh, poetry by Agha Shahid Ali, and the film *Mosquita y Mari* (2002) by Aurora Guerrero. In the practices of each of these artists, family is renegotiated outside of the confines of patriarchal hetero- and homonormativity. Moreover, Gopinath alerts us to how discourses around the migrant experience are centered on notions of family stability as a path to upward mobility. Especially with regards to Guerrero's film, the family is often seen as the site where fantasies of model minoritism are enacted. In this way, "Queerness allows for an alternative form of suspension that resists the forward and upward directionality of normative visions of aspirational success" (82). In addition to this, Gopinath returns to her theorization of the region, particularly when she is segueing from her discussion of Ganesh's photography to Ali's poetry. Gopinath makes the claim that the landscape in Ganesh's photography is generic and often obscured, and yet, to those familiar with the landscape of Kashmir, it is deeply personal and evocative. Using this hypothetical claim that the photographs may have been taken in Kashmir, Gopinath transitions to examining poetry by Ali, who was a Kashmiri writer. Perhaps if the focus would have remained more on the idea of disorientation, this segue would have worked better. Nonetheless, as she does in the previous chapter with references to Varma, by placing classical and canonical artists and writers in conversation with contemporary artists, Gopinath does indeed disrupt familiar notions of temporality to bring forth alternative histories that have long been ignored. Ultimately, she argues "Ganesh, Ali, and Guerrero each offer us routes to and through queerness that veer off-course from the hetero- and homonormative paths to upward mobility and 'making it' that are enshrined in conventional visions of immigrant success" (84).

In chapter three, titled "Diaspora, Indigeneity, and Queer Critique," Gopinath attempts to bring together diaspora and indigenous studies via queer studies. She sees indigeneity and diaspora to be "situated in a binary or oppositional relation to one another: by its very definition, diaspora seems to privilege mobility, hybridity, and uprootedness, while indigeneity seems to privilege belong-

ing, authenticity, and rootedness" (87). In order to bring these realms together, she discusses the works of indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt, San Francisco-based artist Allan DeSouza, and Pakistani-born artist Seher Shah. In examining both diaspora and indigeneity together, particularly through what she terms a "queer optic," Gopinath enables a discussion of shared colonial pasts and postcolonial presents. She argues,

Queerness is an optic through which to read this co-implication of the diasporic and the indigenous: it allows us to see and to sense occluded histories—specifically of settler colonial violence—and how they continue to imprint the present. But queerness also names the ways in which 'the normalizing logic of settler colonialism' produces sexually and gender nonnormative bodies that are then subject to discipline, containment, and regulation. (93)

Although Gopinath draws our attention to the often contested relationship between indigeneity and diaspora, this is an issue that merits deeper consideration. Indeed, the question of the place of indigeneity in the discourse of the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora is vital to raise. As such, its consideration must go beyond the idea that discussing these artists together "demands that we trace the lines of connection between various sites of biopolitical regulation: the Aboriginal settlement, the imperial amphitheatre, the low-income housing project, the Native reservation, the internment camp, the prison" (124).

Nevertheless, Gopinath makes some of her most salient and valuable points in the final chapter of the book, "Archive, Affect, and the Everyday." Here, Gopinath synthesizes her treatment of the concepts of region and subnationality, excavation, and affect. Though her references to all of the artists in this chapter are enlightening, one in particular must be mentioned as it is also the artist whose work marks the introduction and epilogue of the book. This chapter is especially worth reading for Gopinath's wonderful detailing of a photography collection entitled *Hashem El Madani: Studio Practices*, by the Beirut-based Lebanese-artist Akram Zaatari. As Gopinath explains in the introduction, "El Madani is a studio photographer from Saida

(Sidon), Zaatari's coastal hometown in southern Lebanon, and the book was created to coincide with the first exhibition of El Madani's work in the United Kingdom, co-curated by Zaatari at the Photographer's Gallery in London in 2004" (1). What works particularly well in the reference to this collection is that Gopinath brings together her ideas of excavation, particularly through a queer optic, that reconstructs archives in order to bring about a new notion of spatiality and temporality. Indeed, "even though El Madani himself provides captions for most of the photographs in the volume, Zaatari understands his engagement with El Madani's oeuvre less in terms of collaboration with the photographer than as a form of excavation" (149). Moreover, Zaatari's particular fascination with images of men dressed as soldiers, and of men displaying queer sexualities and desires, allows us to read the history of Saida in a different manner. In this way, Zaatari puts the queer optic to work such that "one could also read these images as suggesting how the sexual and gender 'conservatism' of Saida may in fact have enabled especially playful and pleasurable forms of female and male homoeroticism and gender crossing to thrive in the interstices of heteronormativity" (163).

To conclude, Gopinath's valiant exercise in bringing queer studies to bear on diaspora studies via aesthetic practices certainly reveals the limitations particularly present in the scope of area studies. The artists, writers, and filmmakers cited in this book are exemplary of how much area studies has to gain by casting a more serious light on theories from queer studies, and acknowledging the notion of displacement as one that encompasses both geography and sexuality. However, to term artistic modes of production and aesthetic practises that run against the hetero- and homonormative current "queer" is perhaps to run the risk of relegating such modes and practices to a differently restrictive category. If the central issue in this book is that diaspora studies alone tend not to account for queer narratives, it is not immediately clear if the queer studies approach expands the scope to include multiple narratives in dialogue with one another. Moreover, the book would have been better served by a more cohesive definition of queerness, as opposed to Gopinath's approach where queerness is

understood as non-normativity in rather general terms. Nevertheless, the strength of this book is in Gopinath's treatment of queer artists beyond questions of sexual identity, and thus demonstrating the shortcomings of diaspora and area studies to understand identities in similarly fluid and boundless ways. Ultimately, Gopinath's feat in this book is to bring to the forefront a capacious methodology in which excavating the personal provides a rich source of knowledge to interrogate nationalistic, patriarchal, and colonial narratives of cultural and sexual identities.

References

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