

# unruly visions: the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora

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Gayatri Gopinath, Duke University Press, Durham, 2018, 248pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-0035-8, US\$25.95 (Pbk) / 978-1-4780-0028-0, US\$99.95 (Hbk)

*Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* is Gayatri Gopinath's much anticipated second monograph. The author, who is one of the most influential and poignant voices in queer diaspora studies, sets out to foreground new directions in the field. Citing her influential first text, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005), Gopinath declares that her scholarly and ethical impulse for the present text is to point to new and potentially unexpected directions for scholarship on queer diasporas. Gopinath's preference for the seemingly impossible and the unexpected is not only given theoretical analysis throughout her treatment of aesthetic objects and practices; it also becomes the author's own methodology as she lays the groundwork for provocative affiliations between ostensibly unrelated and antithetical theoretical concerns. In this way, *Unruly Visions* is a rejoinder to herself, as she moves in deeply personal directions in order to interrogate what she admits had previously been taken for granted in *Impossible Desires*. Gopinath not only provides a host of concepts and terms for queer worldmaking, such as 'queer aesthetic practice', which is defined by unexpected juxtapositions and affiliations that serve productive and ethical purposes, but she as the author extends the impulse by putting into conversation what might be considered oppositional or hostile disciplines. She asks us to consider how queer critique can place diaspora studies into dialogue with studies of settler colonialism and indigeneity. In this way, Gopinath articulates how queer theory and practice can be utilised to bridge divides, create affective bonds and, for her queer activist audiences, be an argument for stronger solidarities among and between different folk who have experienced imperial and colonial violence from diverse geopolitical and social locations.

The monograph's first body chapter, 'Queer regions: imagining Kerala from the diaspora', asks us to follow the author as she seeks to address criticisms of her previous text through an evocative assessment of the politics of representing the south Indian state of Kerala, her subnational ethnic region of origin. Here, moving between the supranational and the subnational, the author considers the capabilities of a flexible definition of region when considering the politics of representation, specifically when that region is represented by diasporic and sexually deviant formations though consumed by socioeconomically and racially dominant audiences elsewhere. This is followed by the

second chapter, 'Queer disorientations, states of suspension', wherein the author takes issue with liberal humanist discourse as inherently limited for situating and orienting the experiences of queer migration outside dominant and normative models of sexual liberation as a movement necessarily from region to urban and from South to North. 'Diaspora, indigeneity, queer critique', the monograph's third chapter, is perhaps the work's most conceptually ambitious, but perhaps also its most politically necessary. The author seeks to foreground a relational queer theory attentive to representations of 'the intertwining of nonequivalent histories of dispossession and segregation, displacement and dwelling' (p. 91) that constitutes the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora. These practices allow for contingent affiliations between typically unrelated or even antagonistic political concerns. Gopinath is particularly interested in pushing queer diaspora studies to inform and be informed by studies of settler colonialism and the experiences and histories of indigenous folk, in this way offering the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora as a method in 'seeing and sensing these braided histories and their imprint on bodily, psychic, and geographic landscapes' (p. 92). In other words, queerness is an optic, 'a vista of the braided relations of contest *and* comingling between differently racialized and colonized populations and the contradictory, heterogenous and overlapping histories these relations engender' (p. 124). In the fourth and final chapter of the body of the text, 'Archive, affect, and the everyday', we are guided to what might be considered the affective materials of the mundane and quotidian that construct queer experience though remain undervalued and unspectacular, the surplus of capitalist accumulation made obscure or object by official archives and histories. And finally, in the epilogue, 'Crossed eyes: toward a queer-sighted vision', the author powerfully articulates the aesthetic practices of queer diaspora as an 'unruly mode of vision', one that 'deviates from a forward-looking directionality and instead veers toward multiple objects, spaces, and temporalities simultaneously' (p. 174).

Of particular import is *Unruly Vision's* engagement with area studies and the growing call to reconsider the primacy of the nation in conceptualising movement, border crossing and processes of homecoming and un/belonging. Geopolitical concerns are made central in critically engaging with nationalist impulses that seek to legitimise certain sexual and gender formations as authentic, valuable or useful. The author endeavours to push beyond the nation as the primary scale on which to analyse the movement of queer bodies, gesturing towards the powerful notion that the Western metropole is the proper site of queer belonging and the site of political and artistic innovation. In other words, Gopinath challenges homonormative conceptions of queer migration as a movement always already towards the urban West and away from the region, defined as the backward and simplistic sites less serviceable to the networked infrastructure of global capitalist production. Through an extensive and provocative discussion of cultural production on Kerala, the author considers what we might gain through a more serious consideration of bodies that do not follow hegemonic queer pathways promising sexual legitimacy in moving from region to urban and South to North. The aesthetic practices of queer diaspora shift focus to horizontal movements from region to region, South to South or, perhaps more threateningly, to the noncompliant and aimlessly meandering bodies that linger just a little too long beside the corridors and highways of capital, those queer diasporic bodies that may be offered little promise of a homecoming in the Western metropole. With the author's insistence on questioning some of the most widely held and least criticised notions of queer belonging, this text becomes invaluable in considering alternative, deviant futures in our midst. *Unruly Visions* is to be

held as a necessary engagement for those scholars interested in advocating relational and relevant queer theory that seeks out the potential of unexpected and strange affiliations and intimacies against the odds.

## **reference**

Gopinath, G., 2005. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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