

Pinkwatching And Pinkwashing: Interpenetration and its Discontents

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by **Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi**

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 Listen

Over the past year, we have been carefully observing and participating in the rise of anti-pinkwashing queer activism in the United States and Europe as scholars, activists and editors of online and print media. This activism has followed a similar, though not equivalent trajectory to activism in the Middle East. Pinkwashing—the process by which the Israeli state seeks to gloss over the ongoing settler colonialism of historic Palestine by redirecting international attention towards a comparison between the supposedly stellar record of gay rights in Israel and the supposedly dismal state of life for LGBTQ Palestinians in Occupied Palestine—has met stiff and increasing resistance from queer activists in the United States. Increasingly, though, we have been hard pressed to discern the difference between how pinkwashing operates as a story about sexuality in Israel/Palestine and the supposed counter-narratives produced by what has come to be known as “pinkwatching.” In fact, we note that many of the same assumptions that animate the discourses of pinkwashing are unwittingly and sometimes intentionally reproduced in the pinkwatching efforts to challenge the basis of pinkwashing. Keeping in mind that divergences between academic and activist concerns and strategies are in part structured through disciplinary difference, we nevertheless offer the following observations about the collusions between pinkwashing and pinkwatching. The aim is to think more critically about the discourses that we produce through both words and actions, such as the participation of one of the authors on a “LGBTQ delegation” to Palestine or the glossing over of pinkwashing campaigns directed towards Iraq and Iran by the second author in articles published on this website. We have clustered our notes around four loose themes.



[Pinkwashing Propaganda, Images by Blue Star PR]

First, we discuss the ways in which both pinkwashing and pinkwatching operate within and reproduce a discourse of homonationalism. Indeed, without the background picture of homonationalism, neither pinkwashing nor pinkwatching would be intelligible. This is not a normative statement, but rather a recognition of the ways that homonationalism—by which we mean quite simply, that the right to, or quality of sovereignty is now evaluated by how a nation treats its homosexuals—has come to structure the conditions of possibility about sexuality and rights internationally for debates.

Second, we examine the ways in which the practice and normalization of settler colonialism operate as the staging ground for both pinkwashing in Israel and pinkwatching in the United States. While pinkwashing serves to conceal Israel's colonization of Palestine, pinkwatching rarely exposes the United States' self-scripted silence on settler colonialism at home and the ways that discourses of sexuality operate to present natives and people of color as always in need of redemption and education by the liberal state. Discourses on sexuality and criminality are, in fact, a vehicle for multicultural settler colonial states, such as Australia, South Africa, Israel, and the United States, that continue practicing a *mission civilisatrice* in the age of tolerance.

Third, we draw attention to the ways that a myopic focus on Israeli pinkwashing sacrifices a deeper understanding and critique of the ways in which the war on terror, Islamophobia, and rights discourses are intertwined. By severing Israeli attempts to pinkwash Israeli settler colonialism from the discursive landscape, which makes these attempts legible, pinkwatchers absolve the United States of its own pinkwashing of the ongoing occupation of Iraq and of the ways in which discourses of Islamophobia and gay rights are currently being used to racialize and demonize Iran, not to mention to police racial-sexual others in the United States itself. Another way to practice exceptionalism is to note Israel's legal record on gay rights, as many liberal voices in the United States do. But, by severing the supposed gay rights “record” of Israel from its regime of legal apartheid as it pertains to Palestinians, pinkwatchers reproduce gay rights as a measure by which a state can be deemed “liberal” and progressive. In using this discourse, they emphasize particular rights, such as the right to be married or to serve in the army, as

markers to which the gay international should aspire. Thus, they reproduce the very discourse of pinkwashing in their attempts to redress it, by treating gay rights as if they operate in a legal vacuum, separate and separable from the legal system as a whole.

Finally, we are concerned by the way that many pinkwatchers (in the name of political expediency and coalition building) engage in lowest common denominator politics. Thus, pinkwatchers in the US ignore “divisive” questions such as the millions of lifetime Palestinian refugees, the right to militarily resist occupation, the illegal annexation of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights by Israel, and the fact that all of what today is called Israel used to be called Palestine not that long ago. They thus focus their conversations on answering almost explicitly the claims of pinkwashing as regards sexuality, rather than showing how these questions are only made possible by racism, colonialism, and homonationalism.

1. Homonationalism

Many progressive critics miss the point: pinkwashing only makes sense as a political strategy within a discourse of Islamophobia and Arabophobia—it is part of a larger project to anchor all politics within the axis of identity and identitarian (and identifiable) groups. Thus, critics of pinkwashing, who assume an international queer camaraderie, repeat a central tenet of homonationalism: homosexuals should be in solidarity and empathize with each other because they are homosexual. In fact, pinkwashing and pinkwatching are both made possible and legible through the political and social efficacy of homonationalism as a structuring force of neoliberal modernity.

Pinkwashing produces endless questions about the status of gays, lesbians, and trans Palestinians in the West Bank and in Gaza, as well as in Israel. Pinkwatching in the United States not only produces these very same questions, but it also responds to them citing the presence of Arab and Palestinian activist groups and individuals in the Middle East as proof that there are native and authentic LGBT activists in the Arab world. In this way, the relationship between pinkwashing and pinkwatching produces a call and response feedback loop that stabilizes the discourse that pinkwatching claims to critique.

Moreover, pinkwatching has become the primary, myopic lens through which queer youth (but not only youth) are asked to (and allowed to) be politicized around the issue of Palestine—a cycle which reinforces the myriad ways in which solidarity for Palestine/Israel in the United States is often articulated through the presence of different identity groups staking “their claim” in the debate (Jewish- American, Arab-American, Gay-American). One is tempted to call the production of such a narrow and reductive framework, through which American queers are to become politically engaged in foreign policy, an exercise in homonationalism.

Pinkwashing insists that the “queer Palestinian subject” and homophobia show up on Israeli/global terms. Pinkwatching advocates for solidarity for the Palestinian cause only if, and because, Palestinian “queerness” and homophobia shows up on the United States’ terms—terms recognizable by global queer identity formations. In fact, Palestinian queers cannot be cut from the fabric of Palestinian society in a way that mimics the identity politics of the gay(s) internationally. Furthermore, “homophobia” now circulates as a purportedly transparent form of violence that all queers are subject to, regardless of geopolitical locations or historical, cultural, and economic variability. As shorthand for the myriad and complex manners through which heterosexuality can be a privileged form of social organization, it thus also reduces all heterosexualities to the same construct. This globalizing of the term homophobia, and its attendant assumptions works, therefore suture, rather than disrupt the hetero-homo binary and the gender binary upon which it rests/is intertwined.

2. Settler Colonialism and its Affective States

In Israel, pinkwashing works to mobilize a discourse about gay rights to obfuscate the ongoing occupation of Palestine. In the United States, pinkwatching is so focused on recovering the queer Palestinian voice and legitimating queer solidarity frames that it speaks almost exclusively to an American queer audience and its experiences of discrimination and struggle—which it uses as an emotional bridge to Palestinian queers and Palestinians more broadly. Thus, settler colonialism in historic Palestine is framed as a serial of segregated human rights abuses that can be ameliorated piece by piece by state entities. After all, indigenous people everywhere would feel much safer under the watchful eye of the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, and entities such as the United States and the “western” world.

Pinkwashing ignores the settler-colonialism of Israel. Unfortunately, pinkwatching ignores the settler-colonialism of the United States and its own entrenchment in homonationalism. More often than not, pinkwatchers in the United States rightly critique the structural violence of settler colonialism in Palestine, but do so without recognizing the fact that they (we) are also settlers who live in a settler colony. Often, critique of the illegal settlements in Palestine is rendered through a disidentification with those settlers, rather than recognition of a common historical, political, and ongoing practice of settling the United States.

The United States is Israel’s greatest benefactor—its diplomatic and military blank check. Without a critique of US complicity in Israel’s occupation of Palestine, queer solidarity efforts are reproducing homonationalist versions of queerness and colluding with US imperialism. American queers did not need to be reached out to by the Israeli government to have always already been complicit in the colonial and criminal settling of historic Palestine. The fact that they were named as a propaganda target by the Israeli government is only evidence of the normalization of the “special relationship” between Israel and the United States writ large. The very visibility of the call to American gays obfuscates the deeper and more intractable binding between *all* American citizens and the continued settling of historical Palestine.

In addition to shared history and practice of settler colonialism, the United States and Israel are the largest benefactors of homonationalism, as it operates on three scalar registers: internal, territorial, and global.

3. The Dangers of Exceptionalism

Pinkwashing partakes in global circulations of gay rights that accord civilizational status to “gay-friendly” nations, cultures, and religions. In fact, without these global circulations, pinkwashing would not make much sense at all, just as it would not make sense if international circulations of Islamophobia, Orientalism, and particular ideas about Arab culture had not become “normal.” Pinkwashing does not take into account this broader global context, and instead focuses on the state of Israel as the sole offender of this use of gay rights to demarcate civilizational aptitude. The fact that the United States actively pinkwashes its occupation of Iraq and pinkwashes its military desires on Iran (and that US gays are mobilized for this purpose) goes unremarked upon. In fact, the Israeli state’s attempt to “pinkwash” its occupation of Palestine relies on the same discourses that allowed a giant blow up doll of President Ahmadinejad to be sodomized by a blow up nuke held by a white queer dungeon master at the 2011 San Francisco Pride Parade. Pinkwashing activism in the United States by and large ignores the ways that the use of gay rights discourses and bodies have been used to legitimize *American* colonial and military ambitions.



[Ahmadinejad Is Raped by a Nuke at San Francisco Gay Pride, Image from Iran 180]

Both the Israeli state and American pinkwashers point to the successes of gay rights in Israel. Disconnecting the “stellar” status of gay rights in Israel from its historical occupation of Palestine and invasions and occupations of other Arab countries is precisely the mode of analysis through which homonationalism operates. Pinkwashers in the region unsurprisingly do not recognize the right to serve in a colonial army that occupies Palestine and has invaded and occupied other Arab states for decades as a commendable gay right. Pinkwashers in the United States, perhaps in deference to LGBTQ organizing around the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” cite the fact that gays can openly serve in the Israeli military as an example of Israel’s gay rights record. In addition, a focus on supposed “marriage equality” in Israel reproduces the right to marry as a marker of queer equality and the measure to which international queer activism should reach. The fact that the Israeli state does not allow Israeli citizens to marry Palestinians is further normalized every time people celebrate or cite marriage equality in Israel. In the United States, we used to call these state-enforced race policies “miscegenation laws:” laws that were integral to the Jim Crow system of segregation and apartheid.

4. Least Common Denominator (LCD) Solidarity

Pinkwashers, in order to reach broad political consensus, do not talk about the contentious—or what the “peace talks” call “final status”—issues. Similarly, pinkwashers in the US ignore “divisive” questions, such as the right to militarily resist illegal occupation and settlement, the millions of lifetime Palestinian refugees, the illegal occupation and annexation of Jerusalem by Israel, and fact that the “two state solution” is actually shorthand for the normalization and acceptance of the crimes of settler colonialism. In the name of political expediency and coalition building, many pinkwashers engage in what Maya Mikdashi calls “lowest common denominator politics.” (see Maya Mikdashi, *diss*). They thus focus their conversations on responding almost explicitly to the claims of pinkwashing, rather than showing how the very questions are only made possible by racism, colonialism, and homonationalism. For example, rather than respond to the perennial question of whether or not Palestinians are homophobic, (as if Israel, the United States, and the rest of the so-called civilized world have eradicated homophobia), one should query the accusation of homophobia as a political whip. Palestinian Queers for BDS members point out that it is irrelevant whether Palestinian society is homophobic or not. The question of homophobia within Palestinian society has nothing to do with the fact that Israeli occupation must end. For pinkwashing to be effective, as it claims to speak in the name of regional activism (“just listen to what Palestinian queers say about their own lives”), it must respect its histories and

regional specificities.

Taken together, we believe that these four points demonstrate that both 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. In addition, both are strategies directed and redirected through the same power centers and towards the same intended audience: Euro-American gays. We would like to end by drawing attention to the fact that Israel/Palestine are not the only arenas where pinkwashing occurs. A deeper critique of pinkwashing and of homonationalism more broadly must take into account the ways that it is used in settler colonies such as the United States and Israel in addition to the ways that homonationalism is intimately connected to practices of power and empire on the international stage.

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Thibault Gallea · Geneva, Switzerland

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Diane Langford · Wharenuui school

All the more disappointing that she has put her name to this. You'd need a heart of stone not to burst out laughing at the phrase "Interpenetration and its discontents."

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Sarah Colborne

It's always dangerous to extrapolate from a few examples and generalise about all anti-pinkwashing activity. In my view, our experience in Britain as a solidarity movement is very different - despite being the major exporter of settler-colonial activity! The anti-pinkwashing campaign here is not based just in the LGBT community, and our solidarity is not based upon the avoidance of issues such as the right of return, but on the basis of Palestinian rights and liberation.

There are some interesting points raised in this article - but in my view what is missing in it is discussion around a pos... [See More](#)

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Sophia Azeb · London, United Kingdom

I am glad for this piece, and agree with the overall argument. Confronting complicity and complicating self-professed solidarity is profoundly important for any organizer/activist/scholar - pinkwashing activists among them. I am, however, concerned that the presence of Palestinian-American (or Pali-Canadian, Pali-British, etc.) pinkwashing activists is not overtly referenced in any way.

Are we included in the overarching category of "pinkwashing activists in the U.S." who fail to connect settler colonialism, racism, Western military intervention (and propaganda to serve future intervention... [See More](#)

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Diane Langford · Wharenuui school

"Pink-watching" is a nonsensical neologism. How come it was the "pink-watchers" (GLF veterans) at the side of the road as the military contingent marched by at WorldPride, who shouted "Stop the War" and "Get out of the army!" Have you ever heard a "pink-washer" do that? Yet according to the authors, they can't see the difference between "pink-washing" and "pink-watching." This article is seriously flawed and casts doubt on the motivation of the authors. They've got a lot of explaining to do, preferably in transparent language.

Like · Reply · Aug 28, 2012 7:18am



William Peters · Catonsville High School

Amazing. I have no idea what this article means or the responses. Whoa. Academia, much? I keep trying to read it and honestly, what the hell are they talking about? Can someone break it down in English?

Like · Reply · 3 · Oct 11, 2012 9:19am

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info@jadaliyya.com

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