

# AREA IMPOSSIBLE

## Notes toward an Introduction

Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel

### I. Orientations

“Let me cry out in the void, say it as I can. I write on that void: Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir. Or *Cauchemar* in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere?”

—Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*

When a journal (such as *GLQ*) does a special issue on a topic as hoary as area studies, there may well be cause for alarm, curiosity, even consternation. One could ask, what is the novelty in such an engagement? Have we not already been there and done that? Isn't area studies precisely the “void” we want to avoid? After all, the past decade or so has seen the publication of a veritable cottage industry of special issues, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and collections engaging the nexus of geopolitics and sexuality. Various articulated through the language of transnationalism(s), regions, hemispheres, or more directly as a supplement to the conventional forms in which geopolitics has been explored, queer studies has incited a vast traveling archive of commentaries. *GLQ*, specifically, has over the years opened itself up to special issues that have wrestled with questions of geopolitics and representation. As early as 1999, a special issue coedited by George Chauncey and Elizabeth Povinelli addressed the conceptual knots and representa-

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tional flows through which spatialities were fashioned in queered genres. Focusing largely on contemporary predilections and repositories, the issue tuned in to the frisson between global traffic and local habits, urging readers to attend more vigilantly to the political economies underwriting such conversations (Chauncey and Povinelli 1999).

Yet even as such perverse implantations jostle settled notions of geopolitics, some pointed collusions emerge between the various publications. (1) With a few exceptions, the citational underpinnings that provide the theoretical conduit for such explorations were and continue to be resolutely contemporary and drawn primarily from the United States; that is, geopolitics provides the exemplars, but rarely the epistemologies. (2) By invoking non-Euro-American sources, settings, and epistemes as exemplars, queer theory mostly speaks to US mappings of queer, rather than transacting across questions from different sites, colluding and colliding along the way. Thus such concepts as loss, margin, normative, and nonnormative, to name a select few, animate many of these writings, without an attentiveness to them as productive and theoretical formations that concatenate US political projects. (3) One notes a studied avoidance of any engagement with area studies.<sup>1</sup> Most of the writings we read and researched around the queer-geopolitics nexus for this special issue do not name area studies as the form that they are working against, if that indeed is the case.<sup>2</sup> On the rare occasion that a collection, such as the excellent *Islamicate Sexualities*, does invoke the specter of area studies, it appears as a burdensome geopolitical category (incarnated, for example, in the term *Middle East*), to be jettisoned for a broader and more robust understanding of the cultures of Islam (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008).

Given such a strident refusal of area studies in the scholarly engagements with sexuality and geopolitics, why are we attempting to mine a formation so charged with obsolescence? Any quick review of the establishment of area studies in the United States would highlight its emergence as an intelligence-gathering force for consolidating US power, especially between World War II and the Cold War (Szanton 2004). The post-9/11 resurgence of a revised area studies further emphasized the linkages between state power and research on “sensitive” areas such as South and West Asia, the Levant, and North Africa, with money flows from foreign agencies and governments making the knowledge of such “areas” a new marketplace of speculation and profit (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002).<sup>3</sup> Surely, returning to such a moribund and corporatized form would then seem futile, even dangerous, given the fraught legacies of its emergence. Yet how could we not? If area studies is a moribund form, it is outmoded in the same ways that empire is. At a moment when the celebration (or even complication) of concepts such as transnational and global in queer studies is accompanied by the torture and deaths of

queer bodies marked by the legacies of area studies, we contend that there is little else to talk about. To give in to such disturbing scenes as mere exemplars of queer presence and absence, without scrupulous attentiveness to the convoluted densities of geopolitics, would paradoxically reinstate the queer as either exemplary or insular.

We are less interested in summoning up forgotten histories of geopolitics (through area studies) than in grappling with the reasons why certain vocabularies of the geopolitical achieve prominence and why others get relegated to the ash heap of (queer) history. In other words, does the elision of area studies within queer studies constitute a willed refusal to name the epistemological genres that US political initiatives have taken outside its territorial borders, a refusal to concede perhaps that these very commonplaces might hold the residue of post-Cold War settler colonial intimations? Vulgarly put, it is as though, if one did not speak through “area studies,” the United States might be able to retain its hold as a homing device to which salutary queer epistemologies might be continually oriented, and the United States might hold its own as the home of intellectual reserve currency that underwrites the queer collaborations with “area” sans “area studies.” Area studies, as we have pointed out, also suggests avenues into historical freightedness that might be usefully exploited in queer studies collections somewhat attentive to the questions of what the past might carry. After all, under the sign of capitalism, reigning ideas are hardly inimical to the forces of the market.

Our project here is not to provide a corrective or alternative, or to sanitize or otherwise pulverize such efforts to add queer to area. Indeed, any effort to chart or critique any intellectual current is, as we well know, ipso facto reductionist. There is no theoretical cataclysm on offer here. Neither is our invocation of area and area studies (especially as we hear the hesitant rumblings of discontent from within the ranks of our own contributors!) meant to summon up proper knowledge of the elsewhere, most notably the global south, which might circulate to restyle or commute the so-called provincialism of the north. Surely, area studies in its current form, like queer studies removed from the anthropological voyeurism of its early forays into sexuality, is no longer a simple effect of ventures, tourist or otherwise, into terrain whose purchase was in objects routed through ethnographic avidity or fervor or the bona fides of local habitations. In other words, we are unwilling to cull value from the hoary debates on the authenticity of such itineraries or tours to knowledge production. Rather, following Gayatri Spivak (2003), we wish “to approach the language of the other not only as a ‘field language,’” or as “objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant” (9), but as the “irreducible work of translation” (13).

Our epigram hints at one byway. A litany of names, neither of the global

south nor quite Euro-American, balances tenuously on either side of “or” and “in a sea of stories,” each a precarious impossible translation of another, each carrying or encapsulating or ferrying or freighted with the residues of the geopolitics of place, of lambent histories of capture, of traffic, of trade, of pleasures awaiting their possible or never-never time. “Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir . . . Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere?” (Ali 1997: 15). The names are spaced apart, their shapes and profiles obdurately mismatched so that they will not fold smoothly into one another, nor are they isomorphic: the *longue durée* of translation, area, naming, desire caught subtly by the lyric’s contours. The question at the end leaves translation vulnerable, ajar, a choreography from which one might commence, rather than a conversion that occludes or wraps up its trajectories.

In sum, instead of staging area studies and queer studies as segregated field formations, we want to tell, in crude and *fabular* form, a different story of translation. As in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1990), we have opted for the fabular because it can be thought of as the form through which one imagines a better or perhaps just a good enough analytic. Fables underscore peculiar commonalities and repetitions of belief and orient routinized habits of analysis while attending to the generation of value/capital that is implicit in both. Translation (especially in embodied elsewheres) could inadvertently slide into literalization, punctiliousness, or conversion, mislaying in the process the fecundity that the fabular can lug along. Rather, we want to relay something of the messy misalignments, the violating invocations that the epigraph offers, without revisiting salvific modes or completely capturing or captivating value. We want to read the politics of queer and area studies as coincident—if not quite isomorphic—activities, to read both as heuristic practices that see form (whether it be nation, gender, time, biology) as a placeholder that might partly express a promiscuous or incoherent desire or a desire whose content continues to be under erasure. That is, both fields (in theory) are immanent forms that effect a radically ambitious project of recontextualization, each bringing a world into being in such a way that each almost relinquishes or forgets the other. But each remains somewhat tethered to wanton legacies that do not quite overlap or map onto one another, as though each were a kite pulling away from hands or roofs; therein perhaps lie their seductions.

The biggest challenge to both fields has come through the renewed focus on geopolitics and on the thinking of racial difference across divergent temporalities and spatialities. In case our comments be read wearily as yet another cautionary tale of queer studies’ shallow embrace of the geopolitical, its persistent flattening or myopic consumption of area studies (all of which is true), we want to suggest

instead that such heuristic myopia works resolutely in area studies as well, in the form of highly reduced caricatures of complex queer formulations.<sup>4</sup> Each field formation (if we want to stage them as indeed separately complicit), though in divergent ways, works with the difference of geopolitics through a notion of “difference”; that is, they are not about simplistic expansion into sites of alterity to reach a whole but about a resistance to any form of totalizing knowledge. If, in queer studies, geopolitics forms the question that leads to new (altered) knowledges (problematic as they may be), in area studies, particularly in the global south, geopolitics has become an assertion that fixes knowledge in an anchored place and time. To explain: in queer studies, the geopolitical has posed a much-needed challenge to the spatial and temporal logics of the field (logics that had previously mired it in the United States), especially in the aftermath of the turn to transnationalism. Area studies has historically fashioned its domains outside US borders, but despite its range has remained somewhat tied to nationalist coagulations and formations. For area studies, the focus on diaspora, forced migration, and alternative trajectories of collaboration has equally unmoored the geopolitical from the stability of the nation-form. Renewed engagements with the geopolitical have thus shifted the angles through which the two field formations might begin to imagine collusions, collaborations, and conversations. Yet even as the embrace of the geopolitical (in all its avatars) has diversified queer studies’ Euro-American holdings, some troubling analytic turns persist. Queer geographies have undoubtedly stretched to include hitherto untapped regions of the world (read: specifically spaces in the global south), albeit with the local/vernacular reappearing (once again) primarily through ethnographic salaciousness, if it is at all, as incident, exemplar, or evidence, as spatial fodder for the queer mill.<sup>5</sup> Area studies still continues to provide the kind of thick, linguistic, cultural detail that is needed, even if its limitations, which tie area in both its regional and disciplinary specificities, to US political or economic interests, have been signaled.

To continue the story, such geopolitical flattenings in queer studies are further extended through a second analytic form through which area has been displaced by a different ordering of empire: the neoliberal form. More recently, the origin story of neoliberalism (even under erasure) has centered the project of US Empire such that the local appears only in the guise of resurgent markets, emerging fiscal possibilities, risky terrains marked by the incursions of US capital.<sup>6</sup> Affect studies, too, does its best work here, resituating the United States as center yet again, even as it labors to unravel its effects and productions.<sup>7</sup> Of interest here is that it is precisely such a recursive centering of US Empire that has in the past, under the auspices of the Cold War model of area studies, led to a particular focus

on area. These imaginings consume area as evidence and capital for US territorialism and expansionism. Instead of reproducing such maligned models of area studies, we are interested here in looking for ways in which to coagulate areas in the service of a queer geopolitics by focusing on the idea of area as a postcolonial form through which epistemologies of empire and market can be critiqued. If queer studies at its best attempts to grapple with its own ethical failures, an engagement with area studies draws attention to the temporal and epistemological asymmetries at work. The challenge here is to configure a queer form that attends to congealments, failures, and translations of knowledge through an understanding of area as both incommensurable and quotidian, recalcitrant and ordinary. The challenge here is to ask: what does area studies bring to queer studies, even in its providential failures?

Three possibilities come to mind. (1) We need to broaden our understanding of empire beyond the current renewed assertion of US Empire and US neoliberalism as the formative impetus for the politics of queer studies—one has only to look at the plethora of texts in affect studies, for example, that deftly uphold this traumatic origin story. Affect, in however generative a guise, turns into a transposable logic or schema traipsing along from the United States to elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> And just as neoliberalism as neologism does, affect pulls value back, in the ways that we have already highlighted, toward the places where the debates on this particular genre of global traffic are said to have begun and recapitalizes, perhaps even accidentally, the United States as that site; area continues unabated as the direction in which capital flows. To read empire(s) otherwise, subalternity needs to be translated not just as a conceptual turn but as a historical turn mired in the concatenations of enduring and multiple empires, British, Portuguese, French, et al.—something that, for example, even scholars working on South Asia equally deny, given their attachment to the singular story of British colonialism. In other words, how does one go back to write a history of orientalism in South Asia that is not the history of British colonial orientalism (an organizing move that would parallel those we have pointed out for the United States) but something that existed alongside or even before that? Let us emphasize here, these linkages are not just of the past but animate the everyday lives of queer subjects. (2) Of equal concern here is the pervasive understanding of race as understood primarily through the history of the transatlantic slave trade, such that this idea of race could be said to constitute the background against which all representations of racial formation take place. What would it mean to imagine an analytic of race that would take the transatlantic trade to the Indian Ocean and not produce African subjects in the same trajectory of slavery? Race has certainly enlivened the geopolitical turn in

queer studies, but only to harden structures of representation that foreground the Atlantic model. How do we engage the complexities of racialization through a destination, even as bodies traverse multiple oceanic regionalities to produce extant political formations? (3) How do we create durable epistemologies through citational cultures that refuse certain kinds of overdeterminations? Despite the toxic ink spilt over mandating differences and elsewheres, queer scholars (and we are equally implicated in such a formulation) continue to bankroll our critical assets by returning to and retrenching particular hegemonic origin sites, homes, as it were, whether they reside in the United States or in British colonial trajectories. One *au courant* instance would be the petition before the Supreme Court of India to reinstate Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (the sodomy statute, as it is more commonly known). Notwithstanding their best intentions, queer intellectuals and activists (here and there) banked on the singular history of British colonial legislation when, by recalling even Portuguese colonialisms, not to say French ones, they might have intimated other alliances and other avenues of intermediation or routes.

## II. Couplings

Roaming/driftng/meandering from town to house, a vagabond misplaces  
the road that gathers him home.

That which was once a possession  
foresworn from memory  
mine and yours no longer known.

Why question/pursue/hunt  
how memory was forsaken.

Imagine it like this, its source no ethical lapse:  
he simply forgot.

—Miraji, *Tin rang (Three tones)*<sup>9</sup>

I am writing to you from your far-off country. Far even from us who  
live here. Where you no longer are. Everyone carries his address in  
his pocket so that at least his body will reach home.

—Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*

We have chosen to go with lyric, not only as our epigrammatic entrée to every section, but as the centerpiece, the very heart, of this introduction. Some readers might well wonder why. Two queer poets led us to these genres of the lyrical as epistemic possibilities that dodge, foil, or will not easily collude in the instrumen-

talist, intelligence-gathering, language competency–based early drivers of area studies programs.<sup>10</sup> Counterposed against these structural predilections of area studies, queer studies, on the other hand, has long trafficked in the literary, but not quite in the ways that we want to traverse here. Given these conditions, the two poetic snippets in our epigram point to alleys that might muddle some of the more routinized passages through queer studies and area studies: migration or diaspora, refuge or displacement. Where might epistemic homes be said to lie, especially those whose signposts have been waylaid, mislaid? What cartographic enigmas, riddles, or confabulations might be disinterred or exhumed when writing to you from your far-off country, where even you no longer are?

Miraji (1912–1949) and Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001): our two lyricists are South Asian *musafirs*—vagabonds, itinerants—traversing cross-hatched lineages of geopolitics, gender, and aesthetics. Of Kashmiri roots, Miraji moved from Lahore (now in Pakistan) to the royal state of Baroda, from the colonial capital, Delhi, to the financial and film center, Bombay. Writing and scheming his way across the borders, languages, and patrons of colonial India, Miraji invites his readers to desire, to wander, and to forget. No origin stories, no routes home, no attachments to nostalgia can be summoned; after all, as he writes, we simply forget. In the excerpted form of the *ghazal* quoted above, Miraji plays with the form’s penchant for transposition and recursivity, commanding us to come back, as it were, to a recitation of “home,” only to have us forget and let go. The self-remonstration *bhul gaya* (I, you, one [or all] forget) creates a staged ambivalence around who stands for object and subject; rather, we have a poetics of translation (perhaps in a Benjaminian sense) where origins and destinations lose their way in relation to one another. Similarly, the name Miraji translates itself into another gendered poetic acronym (the feminine Hindu Meera, in sensual comportment with Krishna the divine lover, becomes the queer, unmarked Mira-ji) where another’s name, another’s voice forges the geopolitics of a radical queer aesthetic.

Miraji passed away in conditions of unknown displacement in 1949 (some say in Bombay, others say his remains were moved there only after his death), a mere two years after a genocidal partition that gave birth to modern-day India and Pakistan. Kashmir, the storied space of his birth, became the country without a post office, a region caught between the warring histories of a subcontinent unable to let go and forget its violent beginnings.<sup>11</sup> It is thus no coincidence that essays written on the life and work (*shaksiyat aur fann*) of poets such as Miraji return inevitably to such narratives of relocation where Kashmir inaugurates the itinerant form of the poet’s corpus. Kashmir becomes an origin put into place after the fact, a putative home, even as such aspirations carry no ontological, genealogical, or

historical freight in Miraji's writings. These staged lineages suture poet to place, form to geopolitics, eschewing Miraji's emphasis on the violence of origins and his call to forget and wander despite or because of such demands for geopolitical certitude.

For Agha Shahid Ali, born in Kashmir in 1949, the very year Miraji dies, the poetics of geopolitics speaks equally to the difference between a denizen and a citizen. Birthed in a landscape littered with the memories of bodies, lost and found, maimed and reconstructed through the vagaries of state and faith, Shahid writes to you, to us, to his beloved, to the unknown subject and object of a place with no sanctioned address. In Kashmir, the dead return through the poignancy of a voiced prose that proffers a nonliteral geopolitics, even as it marks the locational economies of labor and violence. We are always "far even from us who live here," writes Shahid, cautioning against the seductions of exile and nativism. One cannot, as it were, know, or even learn about Kashmir; rather, we are called to think through Kashmir without recourse to the fetishization of coverage or the placations of temporal linearities.<sup>12</sup> For Shahid, Miraji's poetic archive provided a much-needed aesthetics of location, an iteration of the necessary failures in comprehension that he desperately wanted to (but never could) translate. After all, what does it mean to wander (through readings of multilingual poetic and religious forms, from Japan to the United States, from Anna Akhmatova to Sappho, as did Miraji), only to forget the route home? What if exile, migrant, refugee, all figurations of geopolitical violence that conjure Kashmir, are deployed without the consolatory aspirations of return? What happens if the forgetting of home, self, lover, lineage holds no purchase, its value as loss dispersed?

Let us first say more about *bhul gaya* as the hermeneutic that allows us to speak to the nexus of area and sexuality that is our preoccupation here. *Bhul gaya* is literally a compound verb that brings together *bhulna* (to forget) with *jaana* (to go). The coupling, *bhul gaya*, as doubled verb, unmoors *bhulna* from settled meanings of loss and forgetting, and ferries it along the axis of space and time (*jaana*). As a compound verb, *bhul gaya* incites play between registers of memory and movement, between loss and return, drawing attention to the impossibility of both. We begin with this allegorical summoning of *bhul gaya* to draw attention to the languages of capitalization through which geopolitics enters the diversified holdings of queer studies. In other words, habits of analysis wander (travel the world, as it were) to precisely concatenate home ground, home territory within languages of ethical fortitude. *Bhul gaya* calls for a queer hermeneutics that refuses the seductions of homing devices, of theoretical pathways that suture geopolitics to forms (refused or otherwise) of region, area, nation. Instead, the forgetting that Miraji

and Shahid proffer speaks of a recursive translation of spatialities that renders Kashmir, colony, metropole into a site of political contest rather than into nation.

Lest our prose be misread as a revitalization of the turn to geopolitics as ungraspable form, let us reiterate that it is not. Being caught up in the double bind of representation (as Spivak reminded us so early on) does not absolve us of an ethical attentiveness to the incursions of subalternity. Rather, our efforts here are directed at resisting the impulse (by now well-sedimented in queer studies) to overread geopolitical sites (particularly in the global south) as obdurately and enticingly unresponsive. Indeed, the seductions of such unresponsiveness (often cast in the languages of divergent spatialities and temporalities) accrue a certain political value where you cede to geopolitical difference precisely to lay aside the epistemic work such difference does. How often, we wonder, does the allure of site give way to citation?

Instead, *bhul gaya* gives way to a different economy of presence where the turn to incommensurability as the desired value-form is jettisoned, forgotten. In that vein, one might well ask, why we have opted to site our citations on Kashmir, given how fraught, beset, tense, and troubled the disputations on Kashmir have been? “Kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire, Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir . . . Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire, Kasmir. Kerseymere?” And “a vagabond misplaces the road that gathers him home.” How do we hold to the ethics of attentiveness in delineating Kashmir without conceding to the formalized indexes and inventories of incommensurability, without returning homeward in some simple way as our poets evince? This is a question that ought to make anyone leery. It is not without its pitfalls, if one accounts for the displacements that are endemic to Kashmir’s politics of place, or the impossible desire held so close by so many Kashmiris to come back to the home to which they feel they ought to belong.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is no accident, then, that two Kashmiri poets proffer routes to no return not as literal lodestones for the migrant, the refugee, the violently displaced.<sup>14</sup> Rather, they serve as tracks that relinquish epistemic domiciles and forgo holding places where politics stays the usual course. Perhaps it is the command to translation bequeathed us by these two poets that offers us a guide, if not a map, into how to enter its plangent and potent historicity, perhaps, or especially in fabular form.

“I write on that void . . . in a sea of stories.” Kashmir elicits an entourage of tales, big and small, punctilious or playful, harrowing or lighthearted. Scribbled on the void (how can they not be?), the narratives swing between politics and aesthetics (Kaul 2015: 108–9). Kashmir’s content and context is the effect of competing histories, and under such circumstances representation turns necessarily

aporetic, cagey. Be that as it may, so many who have probed the current prevailing conditions anchor them in the history of the region that we cannot not also do so here; we thus open our foray there.

The contemporary configuration of the state of Kashmir resides in and is contested among India, Pakistan, and China. And by all accounts, Kashmir was nominalized as a territorial entity through the political jostling for power in the region in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Situated between Afghanistan, Russia, China, and British India, the region was parceled from hand to hand, beginning with the Mughals (1586), moving on to the Afghans in the mid-eighteenth century, and finally taken over by the Sikhs toward the early nineteenth century (Rai 2004; Schofield 2010). It became a token in British imperial machinations, a pawn in the great game between Russia, China, Afghanistan, and the British, arguably the precursor to and perhaps the model for postwar and post-Cold War geoterritorial imperatives (Brobst 2005; Hopkirk 2001; Schofield 2010).

The British colonial state crafted the princely Dogra state of Jammu and Kashmir in the mid-nineteenth century out of multilingual, variously ethnic constituencies. In doing so, it also set up many of the political exigencies for the socio-political-religious and internecine battles being waged on the ground to date (Kabir 2009; Kaul 2015; Rai 2004). But even as the British had set their sights on what was to become Kashmir, travelers, poets, and photographers reinvigorated Kashmir as an aesthetic object, sublating the jurisdictional, bureaucratic, legislative, and military precipitations of the great game in the opulent semiotics of the sublime.<sup>15</sup> That very same unutterably colonized aesthetic preoccupation continues as palimpsest into the postcolonial. For example, Kashmir emerges as the exquisite and elysian optic of pleasure in songs from 1960s Bollywood cinema bent on forging pastoral nationalisms, and as indispensable backdrop in militarized movies made from the 1990s onward that attempt to propel a virulently scopic patriotism, dropping by the wayside anything that might bring the people of the valley into view (Kabir 2009; Kaul 2015). In the face of such a history, where anachronisms from a long trajectory of areas perhaps impossible to still marshal so much sway, how can we not, along with Kabir and Kaul, turn to the aesthetic promise and peril of the lyrical *bhul gaya* as possible episteme? As Shahid, composing from afar in the face of the violence on the ground and the specific calls for Kashmiri autonomy in the 1990s, asks: “[Do] you now see why we give no interviews?” We turn in the next section to translations of that pressing question.

### III. Translations

I hold your breath. Look, I slow my fingers.

Do you now see why we give no interviews?

When you leave, my hands will again be spiders.

—Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office*

The ambition (for better or worse) of this special issue is necessarily multiple, diffuse, even didactic, as are its subjects, a confabulation that holds close to the tenderest incarnation of the question: “Do you now see why we give no interviews?” Our aspiration (for better or for worse) remains one that transposes the myriad semiotic registers incited by calling for area without representation. Rather than inclusivity or coverage—the seductions that the interview form so often pulls into shape as it incites presence—the issue culled the provocations of dispersal / of the question.

What would it mean to hold someone else’s breath, to slow one’s fingers? To hold or grasp at some “thing” that by its very nature is ephemeral, can never be tangible, yet follows inexorably one after another? Can it be a “thing”? Our introduction cusps itself around Kashmir, the placeholder of provisional names with spaces between them, its territoriality fungible, wisped away constantly, however slow one’s fingers become in futile gestures that venture to hold it still. Here lie the vulnerabilities of fabular intimations through translation, through which we oriented this introduction. Merely breath between the litany of names, Kashmir can never be marshalled fully as the site, as the thing that must speak its truth, even one that unravels its fulsome and torsioned history, for someone (you) standing before it asking for an interview from it. Rather, it facilitates the questions through which we weave our provocations and alignments. Even as one cannot not know it, Kashmir provisions the possibilities for epistemology without rendering itself as knowable, as the place constantly constituted as an object for geopolitical fracas, as the denouement in the games of geopolitics. What does this then entail for the contributors of this special issue who bring area to queer in however friable or fungible a fashion?

“Area Impossible” (the title serves as a lure and provocation) commences with a dossier, an array of meditations solicited as a roundtable with scholars, whose publications, though consistently seminal to our understanding of sexualities and geopolitics, are rarely positioned within area studies (given the insistent repudiations that dog any calls to return to it), alongside those who did not perhaps see themselves in regular conversations with queer studies. We requested our

writers to ruminate on what they saw (or didn't see) at the joints between the field formations they inhabited and queer studies as a way of stirring critique, niggling at the very foundations of the joints. Neferti Tadiar's, Keguro Macharia's, Ronaldo Wilson's, Diana Taylor's, and Jasbir Puar and Maya Mikdashi's generously curious, pointedly indicative, capaciously aesthetic gestures generate openings that are picked up in the essays that follow. Scanning the pieces, readers will find that each broaches area, sexuality, desire in such a succinct and voluminous fashion that the very notion turns friable in their hands. Their interrogative reflections, "hands like spiders," splaying across the geopolitics of space and time, summon the willful semiotics of area and genre, and intimate routes to the questions with which we began the introduction.

In "Ground Zero" Tadiar tailors her intervention around the epistemological commonplaces that were thrown up as we surveyed queer imbrications with geopolitical. Tackling them head-on, she asks, "When we do the critique that we do so well, do we not employ the grammar of the police? . . . Do we communicate and traffic in the particular colonial, capitalist, real abstract codes of social and subjective being that make up an American grammar?" Tadiar pulls that particular uneasy call to commensurability away from the places where it perches so fervently or uncaringly or unheedingly in the guise of "transferable cultural logics" that constantly home in on or return back home to the United States, "these nearly Kantian categories," "gender, race, sexuality"—the categories [that] roll off the tongue like dice"—which "inspire and organize practices of expropriation of value." Tadiar's mediation dumps value squarely into or at the heart of what it means to reside with our own volatile culpability in these forms that ferry sexuality, perhaps orienting it toward area, forms that we settle into so well, so succinctly. Setting the stage for all the essays that follow hers, Tadiar's grammar tunes into the porosity of the "diminishing plethora of verbs of action" immanent in the best lives people make for themselves, reaching for what they might yet obtain in areas conceived as "places of lives."

Macharia takes off from here to his place of life as an "Africa-based queer scholar." In other words, he reroutes queer to area in the beleaguered familiar formation of area studies. Here, if one can even describe where he is as a "here," Macharia's logics of transferability encounter an unwittingly obdurate blockage of fluency. Translation turns "dissonant" for him precisely where queer meets area, where the possibility of making sense of himself for another is no longer viable or legible in the phrases that he carried back with him from the United States. Neither queer nor (not) Africanist is portable; all they incite is puzzlement. Even race, however mutable into an Afro-Atlantic political genus, fails to conform; not even

the “deracinating power” of “black queer” ferries any purchase. The question of value peters out not because Macharia is gesturing toward a utopian response to the lamination of place into sexuality but because translation goes awry. Macharia suggests picking up a word from the lexical world of his present. *Tala*, culled from the Kenyan scholar Neo Musangi, is a description, not quite sedimented into thing or identity, not quite even a fully fashioned form of identification. At stake here is a vocabulary that neither asks for nor fully refuses the nominalization “native.” “What demands,” Macharia asks, “would *tala* make on the concepts and histories in which queer studies is embedded?” What fluencies might queer studies have to abrogate? The pathways back to some notion of home dead-end with these questions, wending through the wayward stories with which he closes. As though invoking the Urdu poet Miraji whose itinerancy is the lyrical byway to misplacing home without an ethical lapse, Macharia closes his musings with waywardness as epistemic possibility: as a somewhat naive, somewhat nuanced “stubborn refusal to come to the point.” What Macharia approaches through or ventures through waywardness is the indifferent native, one who often simply does not show up, sometimes simply wanders off, giving no interviews, unhitching himself from the provocations of area and queer, even as he subpoenas and beckons vocabulary that is of little interest to scholars from the United States, epistemologies that seem not to be able to accrue value there. “Because value,” in Spivak’s inimitable analysis when she was confronted with the question of Asia, “simple and contentless, is just a form in use when things are made commensurable” (Hairong 2007: 445). And when translation tarries or temporizes as it does here, commensurability falters as well.

Two of our contributors curve their ripostes around performances that also raise the specter of forestalled commensurability. Wilson jettisons the bared bones of the analytic for the spectacular striations of aesthetic that stages, voices, and visualizes analytic intersessions. In his prose-poetry-sketch-photo-performance “clicked on [to] play” through vistas that improvise each other in temporal scapes, area patterns into pretext, semblance, facade, phase. As Wilson traipses, struts, bolts, wends, welters his way through the sexual and racial geopolitics of encounters settled in the United States wearing literal and figurative masks, it is almost as though area mutes into breath, the between of the narrations, the scenes, the gap between mask and skin, the rent into which blackness, as racialized, might arrive torn. From bar to beach, dinner party to prize committee, Wilson inhabits a marketplace of circulation that moves through an are(n)a of encounters, spilling stories of space and time along the way.

Taylor promulgates the collusions between area and sexuality in yet another

enunciatory mode. She recounts the lineaments of what ensues when the elsewhere is performed in Canada, a play by two Mexican artists that spawned a fraught series of politicized encounters when it faced an audience unwilling to breach the impossibilities of translation. Caught in an economy that poised two players against each other—the long legacy of gendered and sexualized colonial violence choreographed in contemporary valences through irony and parody against the so-called harms that the deployment of such representational spectacles might have induced in an audience unattuned to these registers—translation ground to a halt. It was as though the shop-soiled debates in anthropology about trucking the native back to institutions of knowledge production in the metropole were refurbished again in the currency of sexuality. The untranslatable provocateur here was perhaps the best of what can be gleaned if area studies conspires with sexuality, the studied droll absurdist handling and dramatization of anachronism (of what the past might carry) in the service of queer politics, an area impossible, one that in this case was unable to hail audiences fleeing to the shelter of their own epistemic homes. Is this the lesson to which we must attend?

What if the passages home were blockaded by provincializing queer theory, nominalizing it or reframing it as area studies? What alternative possibilities might be thrown up if area as “ground zero” was the temporalized biopolitical? Puar and Mikdashi’s “cartography of critical theory” yields multiple registers of the biopolitical, but two stand out: the biopolitics of maiming and stunting as the quotidian condition of foreshortened everyday corporeality, and killing without mourning, the future congealed into the bodies of men marked by the regulatory impetuses that sediment heterosexuality. Can we claim such bodies, they ask, as queer, processing them through area? In response they route their germinal questions through the transnational Middle East to think through the work performed by “the temporality of the ‘crisis.’”

Temporality, the promise and peril of area studies, then might provide an epistemic demeanor for the impossible nexus of area with sexuality. Each of the three long essays in this special issue is somewhat configured through time, in Wilson’s words “capturing the patterns,” a “poetics of asking what happens through improvisation, or in the gesture of writing about the scene, the area/arena where the story is experienced within time that folds through multiple modes of the event.” The essays translate time through area, as it were, in possibly incommensurable directions. Mobilizing recombinant time as knots, as loops, Lucinda Ramberg dives into the curious promiscuity of the asynchronous temporal embodiments that flesh out the everyday household politics of Dalit communities. For Ramberg, theogamy as obsolescent anachronism splices across and cuts into

the future-driven gendered proprieties that conversion into Buddhism as political deliverance brings in its wake. Aliyah Khan ferries in the historical legislative record alongside the labor of desire to translate shipboard intimacies between men and between women into kinship. The nominalizations *jahaji bhai* and *jahaji bahin* (ship brother and ship sister) provide her leverage into both the racialized landscape of the Anglophone Caribbean and the more contemporary lesbian fictional narrative with which she sites the “voyager who is not, however, a permanent exile.” Home, then, through the crossed chronologies of desire, of sexuality, of traffic across water, loosens its vantage, dropping area in its wake. Ashley Currier and Thérèse Migraine-George turn away from the constantly renewed fiscally bounded bequests of Afro-pessimism, the metaphors that toll the present of continental (albeit transnational) conditions, toward genres such as film and photography where the entangled timelines of queer and African studies might signal possible futures embodied in and gelled into Afro-optimism.

The translations of area that this issue conjures do not parse together easily in any settled vernacular of geopolitics. But perhaps it is exactly this refusal to easy legibility, even to the point of frugal dispersal or even exuberant disarray, that makes the coupling of area and queer as generative and confounding as it is. The historical and temporal markers that produce “area” as catalogs of representation are erased, in these pages, by singular and perhaps even peculiar reproductive historicities that envisage those markers as messy, vitalizing, and ultimately queer. The urgency here is to reinvent, from the are(n)as of the stories told, new queer idioms of the geopolitical. Attentive to itinerant provincialisms, such fabular figurations of area impossible remain vulnerable to wayward translations, forgoing settled orientations to home.

## Notes

Our first words of thanks must go to our editors, Nayan Shah and Elizabeth Freeman. Nayan shepherded us through the early stages, while Beth made the whole issue possible with her caring and trenchant guidance. At many different moments, and in many different ways, Kath Weston and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns have kept us sane through the myriad twists and turns of editing a special issue. We owe each of our anonymous reviewers a debt of gratitude for their tireless (and unpaid) labor. And last but not least, a big *shukriya* to our contributors who were painstaking, precise, and enthusiastic. This issue is dedicated to all the queer natives of area(s) impossible.

1. We use the term *area studies* to demarcate an interdisciplinary approach to the study of “areas” of the globe. Even as area studies engages with questions of geopolitics,

broadly speaking, its success (and failure) as a knowledge formation derives from a long history of state-sponsored programs. For example, in 1958, Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (renamed the Higher Education Act in 1965) provided funding for research and training in international and foreign-language studies. Title VI continues to be a significant source of funding for programs devoted to area studies that span fields in the humanities and the social sciences. For a short history of the emergence of area studies, see [news.stanford.edu/news/multi/interaction/0507/area.html](http://news.stanford.edu/news/multi/interaction/0507/area.html).

2. A sampling of such efforts from the past ten years or so would include Al-Samman and El-Ariss 2013; Blackmore and Hutcheson 1999; Carpenter 2011; Downing and Gillet 2012; Hough 2013; Liu and Rofel 2010; Renne 2000; and Sahli 2008. There are, of course, too many such collections and special issues to list in their entirety.
3. See, for instance, Volkman 1999 and Szanton 2004. Collections such as Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002 speak to the failure of area studies, particularly in the context of a corporate university. For Masao Miyoshi and Harry Harootunian, knowledge formations such as gender studies and cultural studies must specifically intervene in reclaiming area studies from its entrenched Cold War narrative (1–19).
4. Influential collections such as *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Szanton 2004), for example, attend to questions of gender and sexuality by simply routing them through foundational categories such as woman, man, and occasionally homosexual. Even a collection such as *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002), which acknowledges the importance of gender studies and cultural studies to the growth of a more robust area studies, does little to engage with histories of sexuality as histories of region or “area.”
5. We are, of course, not the first ones to make such a claim. Scholars such as Elizabeth Povinelli have repeatedly called for “radical interpretations” of ethnographic studies of the non-West. Through her work on aboriginal communities in Australia, Povinelli pushes at the question of what is at stake in recuperating ethnographic details and what is entailed in how those details are collected and communicated. For Povinelli, it is crucial that we attend to the current demand for ethnographies of sexuality that resurrect “sex out of corporeal practices” and return us to the very knowledge technologies of colonial liberalism that we wish to abrogate. She calls for an engagement with the “breach and shadow” of the geopolitical forms that produce sexuality’s difference in the first place. See Povinelli 2002: 73.
6. Texts that laid some of the groundwork for contemporary analyses of neoliberalism include *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, by David Harvey (2005), and *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, edited by Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (2005). Whatever historical trajectory they offer for neoliberalism, all the books and articles written around this time imagine its directionality as from the west to the rest. Even Harvey’s (2005) chapter “Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics,” which might have pro-

vided an anterior course for neoliberalism, sets the west up as the stage that provides the conditions for the Chinese entrée as an emergent power in global marketing and finance (121). Though some recent books such as those by William Davies (2014) and Philip Mirowski (2014) challenge some of the premises that center the value accorded to neoliberalism, they still continue to hold on to that particular orientation. Another way to come at neoliberalism would be through the work of Kalyan Sanyal (2013), an Indian economist and historian. Sanyal tracks the historical nuances of the flow of development capital that does not begin in the West and suggests trajectories that ascribe a central place neither to neoliberalism nor to Euro-America.

7. One pioneer in the US overtures into affect studies is the extraordinarily valuable collection *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (Berlant 2004). Offering clusters of cases and genealogies, it has a curiously suggestive genealogical oversight that is pertinent to the concerns we are raising here: Buddhism. A religion and practice organized around compassion, or *karuna*, Buddhism has become workaday fare for the United States, routinized as religion, belief, or practice. Whether it is routed through yoga or Tibetan/Japanese/Indian meditation or through the more working-class movements such as Soka Gakkai, compassion in this key has become a part of the cultural politics of a quotidian Euro-American lexicon. These genres of lapses in attention to direction continue unabated in the introduction to the more recent 2010 collection *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth. Though the editors are at great pains to show multiple descents for affect, all the lineages they offer stop short at Europe or stay within the purview of the United States, holding on to the United States as the most prolific site of the production of texts on affect. Gregg and Seigworth offer affect's blurred ancestries in the introduction, going as far back as the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Given their attentiveness to some sort of historical genus, the exclusion of one of the earliest ventures into parsing, cataloging, and appreciating aesthetic and political affect is notable. We are speaking here of *rasa/dhvani* theory in Sanskrit where feeling assumes both "force and form" (5), is immanent and explicit. These are not lost histories of affect, especially as British and German Romanticism and invocations of sentiment were frequently deliberately curved around eighteenth-century translations, including those from Sanskrit by Indologists such as William Jones.
8. Al-Samman and El-Ariss's 2013 introduction is a case in point. Transacting their invocations of affect through Heather Love's (2007) provocative and generative interrogation of the politics of feeling in *Feeling Backward*, they reinstitute the United States as the reserve currency holder for affect. Love, tracking some of her lines into feeling through British modernism, like so many before her, situates modernism firmly in the West. What would it mean to nuance that history through South Asian movements such as the Progressive Writer's Association, many of whose members were engaged in working discussions with British and American modernists (Patel 2002)?

In posing such interrogative interventions in how we might imagine the flows of literary capital embedded in affect, we are not attempting to regulate writing or take a hatchet to ventures that have an enormous amount of value. We are instead suggesting directions not taken that might have led to alterior pedigrees and sight lines.

9. For a manuscript version of the poem, see Miraji n.d.: ghazal 1.3; for an extended exegesis on this fragment, see Patel 2002.
10. See Cumings 1997 and Szanton 2004.
11. In its current incarnation Kashmir is uneasily balanced between India, Pakistan, and China.
12. In “Essay 3: The Witness of Poetry” Kaul (2015: 135–61) turns to the lyrical as the conduit for a possible futurity for Kashmir. Prior to Kaul’s demands on the lyric, Kabir (2009: 138–41) deployed Shahid’s lingual propensities to explore the lineaments of the poet as witness to the conflicts in the Kashmir valley. But lyric as the mouthpiece that speaks the truth to power, especially in cases of violence, had a spokesperson in Pandey 1992.
13. For meditations on the vagaries of the Kashmiri question, see Kaul 2015; Kak 2011; Rai 2004.
14. The lyric offers a salutary point of entrée for a beset region such as Kashmir, especially as marshalled by writers such as Kaul (2015) and Kabir (2009).
15. In fact, as Kabir (2009: 13–15, 93–97, 157) points out, the “great game” generated much of the thrill that underwrote aesthetic projects which may never have visualized or spoken them on their surfaces.

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