

Review - The Global Trajectories of Queerness

Written by Andrea Waling

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ANDREA WALING, NOV 24 2016

The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South
Edited by Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala
Brill, 2016

The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South provides an account of LGBTIQ politics and notions of queerness in non-Western nations and third world countries, or what is commonly becoming known as the Global South. Developed out of a critique of the tendency for researchers to rely heavily on Westernised conceptions of sexuality and gender, editors Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala seek to explore how queerness as both a political movement and identity marker function in non-Western nations amidst concepts such as neoliberalism, colonial and post-colonialism, globalisation and capitalism.

This collection is comprised of sixteen essays including the introduction, each dealing with varying aspects of queerness, sexuality, and gender amidst broader issues such as culture, nationalism, poverty, rights, equality, and identity. It spans a variety of anthropological, political-historical, and sociological approaches in exploring how 'queer' is utilised and understood in the Global South. The volume begins with a compelling introduction by Ashley Tellis and Sruti Bala that begins the line of questioning concerning how scholars are conceiving of queerness and queer identities in the global world. Outlining the emergence and use of queer in the Western context, Tellis and Bala propose to offer accounts of LGBTIQ+ politics within non-Western spaces. In particular, they seek to offer a set of critiques regarding the use of 'queer' as a homogenising global entity and political movement that disguises its colonial and imperialist tendencies, doing so through exploring non-Western accounts of gender, sex and sexuality politics, and personal experiences of 'queerness.'

The first six essays in this volume deal with theorisations of queer theory and whether the Global South can offer an alternate approaches. For example, Neville Hoard's essay on queer theory as a symptom of neoliberalism begins with the question as to what is queer theory, and how is queerness understood and utilised in academic scholarship when situated in a non-Western context. Hoard navigates the complexity of 'queering' and queer theory itself when he positions it within non-Western cultures. He contends that queer theory invokes a double bind, where on one hand, queer theory in different locations, places and times has induced effects that proliferate new sexual identities requiring new legal and regulatory frameworks, while on the other, labels sexual practices rather than identities, but then in turn renders such practices as identities in order to be assimilated within a set of white, Anglo-centric conforming discourses. Hoard calls for a theorisation of queer theory that takes into account issues of sovereignty and imperialism as way to counteract attempts for an universalisation of queer identities, and instead accounts for the multiple universes of queerness.

The following six essays explore legislation and regulation of sexual desires, in particular exploring the role of international non-governmental organisations, and tensions around competing notions of the ideal queer. Krystal Ghisyawan's essay on women who engage in sexual activity with other women in Trinidad explores how such women understand and negotiate these sexual practices without identifying as homosexual, bisexual or lesbian. She finds that their vocabularies of identification highlight tensions between queerness being identified with problematic trajectories of colonisation and white privilege, and queerness as being a liberation from social dogmas. Like Hoard, Ghisyawan notes the double bind that queerness offers those residing in non-Western spaces such as Trinidad,

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where it is both an identity of assimilation into white, colonialist and imperialist beliefs and practices, while simultaneously, functions as a release from the constraints of their own culture relating to experiences of marginalisation and oppression as non-heterosexual identifying individuals. Ghisyawan calls for further attention into how non-Western cultures navigate these binds in their own engagement with LGBTIQ+ politics and identities.

The last three essays challenge the romanticisation of the 'global queer community' and the assumptions that it exists as a stable, coherent and identifiable entity. The first essay by Guillermo Nunez Noriega heavily critiques the notion of 'interculturalism' and its tendency to hide different kinds of vulnerabilities within LGBTIQ+ and indigenous cultures. Drawing from research exploring HIV/AIDS in rural Mexico, Nunez Noriega traces the use of queer theory in its attempts to classify Mexican systems of sexuality and gender within an Anglo-Centric worldview. He argues that interculturalism can in fact be understood as a form of sexual and capitalist exploitation, contending that culture cannot be conflated with worldview, nor can worldviews correspond with every kind of community.

This volume is an exemplary look at how 'queerness' and the notion of a global queer community is conceptually flawed by exploring gender and sexuality in non-westernised and third world countries. In doing so, this volume challenges contemporary understanding of queerness and queer theory, in particular its white-centric and Westernised worldview that is assumed to extend to all cultures. This volume highlights the varied ways in which gender and sexuality are not only conceptualised outside of Westernised perspectives in other nations, but highlights the tensions and anxieties concerning the beliefs of a 'global queer community' and its rather colonising and imperialist aspects. This is perhaps the most intriguing part about this volume, as it exposes the uncomfortable nature of 'queerness' and LGBTIQ+ politics more broadly as being informed by a very narrow set of beliefs and ideals from a mainly white, Anglo-centric, middle-class perspective.

There are a number of strengths to this work. It was pleasing to see a set of essays by names I had not yet read regarding queer politics and activism, many of which who are involved in the cultures they study, bringing to light not only new attention on previously dismissed areas of cultural research, but also bringing forward scholars who work and reside in the Global South. I felt that the inclusion of activists who work within these communities was timely, and the combination of theoretical essays, personal reflections, and formal research studies brought varied perspectives on the issues that may not have been found from a purely academic standpoint. I was left questioning how my own views about gender, sex and sexuality in relation to issues of masculinity and LGBTIQ+ politics is domineered by Western scholarship. I had not actually considered how certain political movements, in particular 'queer' could be both one that is liberating and freeing, but also one that imposes a set of Anglo-centric doctrines on a particular cultural concerning their own practices of sex, and embodiments of sexuality and gender.

My one criticism is the way same-sex and queer are at times, used interchangeably throughout this volume. Same-sex in particular is an older term no longer able to account for all experiences of sexuality, sex and gender. While the volume itself deals with such diversity, the use of phrasing such as 'same-sex politics' required critiquing, or highlighting its limiting view. As such, this volume sells itself short by actually adhering to a Westernised notion of queerness at times that it seeks to critique within its text through use of this language.

I found this volume a pleasure to read as it evokes thought-provoking questions about LGBTIQ+ rights and what it means to be queer outside of the dominating Western context. It effectively weaves nuanced understandings of politics within diverse nations, and how such politics inform, or are informed by, LGBTIQ+ identities and the surrounding culture. It challenges the monolithic assumption as to what LGBTIQ+ rights should look like across all cultures, and instead reflects on how differing cultures will not only result in varied understandings about sex and gender that do not subscribe to a Western model, but how such understandings are then reflected in the political landscape to which the culture inhabits. Further, it also contests LGBTIQ+ identities in and of themselves, and highlights the flaws in such categorisations when they cannot be easily applied outside of a Western context, especially when considering the context of language. This is a must read text for anyone teaching gender studies and seeking to diversify their accounts of queer theory, gender and sexuality from cross-cultural perspectives in a sophisticated manner.

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About the author:

Dr Andrea Waling is a research officer in the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia. Her research and teaching interests include theoretical and empirical examinations of men and masculinity, investigations of sex and gender in the media, sexualisation and raunch culture, and LGBTIQ+ issues. She completed her undergraduate degree at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, majoring in anthropology, and her PhD in sociology at Monash University, focusing on the study of Australian men and masculinity. Her PhD thesis is currently being adapted into a book entitled *White Masculinity in Contemporary Australia: The Good Ol' Aussie Bloke* for publication in 2019. She is currently working on a number of research projects, such as *Muscling Up: Australian Men, Sexualisation and Body Image Enhancement (2015-2017)*, an Australian Research Council Discovery project that seeks to investigate the body image-enhancing practices of Australian men in relation to broader issues of masculinity and embodied subjectivity in late modernity.