

Omar Kasmani,
editor

Pak^{*}istan

Desires

QUEER FUTURES
ELSEWHERE

PAKISTAN DESIRES

BUY

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QUEER FUTURES
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Desires

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May our desires
—to dream with Billy-Ray Belcourt—
unfinish us!

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Contents

xi		<i>Acknowledgments</i>
1		Introduction *stan Omar Kasmani
		MEHFIL
23	1	Of Girls, Desire, and Sacred Things Syeda Momina Masood
31	2	Loving Men, Loving God Shayan Rajani
49	3	Fixed Possibilities The Threat of Transmasculinity in the Urdu Tale of Agar Pasha M. Khan

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- 65 4 Spaces of Critique, Spaces of Desire
Gender-Crossing in Pakistani Cinema
Gwendolyn S. Kirk
- 83 5 Partitioned Listening
Sonic Exercises Outside of Archival Time
Syma Tariq
- 100 6 Miraji's Poetics for Queering History
Geeta Patel
- 118 7 This Is Home after All
Nael Quraishi
- 121 After Heather Love, and Others
Asad Alvi
- MEHFIL
- 125 8 Temporal Nonconformity
Being There Together as *Khwajasara*
in a Time of One's Own
Vanja Hamzić
- 146 9 On the Other Side of the Rainbow?
Khwaja Sira Pieties, Politics, Performances,
and the Tablighi Jama'at
Claire Pamment
- 166 10 A Queer History of Pakistani Art
Anwar Saeed and Other Ways of Love
Abdullah Qureshi

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PRESS

184	11	Beyond Hooking Up Tales from Grindr in Pakistan Ahmed Afzal
203	12	How I Like It Nida Mehboob
216	13	Queer <i>Desi</i> Formations Marking the Boundaries of Cultural Belonging in Chicago Gayatri Reddy
236	14	Queer in a Time of Kashmir Jeffrey A. Redding
251		Afterword Everywhere <i>Mehfil</i> Anjali Arondekar
257		<i>Contributors</i>
263		<i>Index</i>

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Acknowledgments

This book joins many an ongoing quest for queerer and kinder futures in Pakistan. How might we, who live under conditions of straightness, take desire as a critical mode of belonging and queer worldmaking? What shapes might a conversation on queerness take in present-day Pakistan? How might we act today so as to refuse the occlusion of queers in the nation's pasts and futures? It was with such ambition and similar questions that I convened a panel of presentations at the 26th European Conference of South Asian Studies in Paris in July 2018, titled "Pakistan Desires: Queer Futurities of the Urban." While the panel was a success and much fun was had, the importance of gathering in Pakistan was all the more sharply felt. Breaking path in March 2019, a three-day conference was held at the Gurmani School of Humanities and Social Sciences, LUMS University in Lahore: "Queer Futures: Politics/Aesthetics/Sexualities." The incredible Nida Kirmani hosted and helped co-organize the conference—in many ways, a first for Pakistan—and Anjali Arondekar delivered the keynote address. While both these events have served as springboards for this book project, the idea and endeavor of *Pakistan Desires* is also one that has slowly nurtured in the company of friends, many a time, informal *mehfils* (Urdu for gathering, assembly, forum, party), which became sites of cothinking and desiring together: Asad Alvi, Marvi Mazhar, Jeff Roy, Pavithra Prasad, Rumya Putcha, Max Schnepf, and especially Kamran

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Omar Kasmani

Introduction

*stan

To be a Pakistani today is to know half-languages, to always not find the word, to not understand because it had never been spoken. I couldn't come out in Urdu. I couldn't come in Urdu. Being queer, and orgasms, are experiences which I borrow. Without the word, does the thing exist at all?

—Syeda Momina Masood (2019, 176)

We embark from an unlikely place to think queer. We learn how queer thinking in such a place might reflect, refract, even refuse our analytical habits around the term *queer*. *Pakistan Desires* is a thinking in constellation and company that queries how desire emerges and transacts, turns abundant and acquires political charge through queer-affective forms in writing, art, image, sex, religious belonging, and political participation in the context of Pakistan. In a country where a great many civil liberties remain still at bay—and colonial laws criminalizing homosexuality remain unchallenged—desiring serves as a queer-affective rubric for diverse yet shared forms of acting and undermining in emergent and imagined conditions. Thinking queer in Pakistan then, even if a desiring in *half-languages* to lean on Masood (2019, 176), is fully critical so long as it serves to imagine, trail, and gather futures in ways that do not extend shapes of the present.

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Nesting in the very invocation, *Pakistan Desires*, is the book's principal and overarching claim. In asserting that a place desires, actively and continually, we declare and articulate not only the multiple ways in which a place feels queer but equally how queer feeling is tied to ideations of place. More critically, we contend that habituated conditions of the present in Pakistan, however restricting, afford a desiring. The desirer-seeker—as captured in the Sufi notion *talib*—invites us to consider the ways in which desiring is at once a commitment to, and a condition of, continual seeking. The emphasis here is not how desirous subjects come into being in a national context or how these might align with neoliberal subjectivities elsewhere, as one might locate in Lisa Rofel's *Desiring China* (2007). Here, desire stands for diverse pathways to pursue, imagine, want, speculate, act out, and realize the tenuous future narrative possibilities of queer lives and loves in Pakistan while also seeking to locally mitigate the “problematic occlusion of queerness”—and by extension of queers—in the narration of its public, national, and more-than-national histories (Henry 2020, 4). So long as queer desire, to quote Gayatri Gopinath, “does not transcend or remain peripheral” to the particular histories we hereby engage but is made “central to their telling and remembering” (2005, 2), we seek to “envision other possibilities of existence exterior to dominant systems of logic” (20). Similarly, we do not proceed from a stance of historical unthinkability or impossibility. This also is not simply a move to repair or recover, or for that matter, furnish Pakistan with a queer past. On the contrary, desire in this volume, to stay with Billy-Ray Belcourt, “is a present-tense verb whirling into the future tense” (2020, 81). It names an abundance-seeking, plurally conceived, forward-moving quest, that critical practice by which we overcome Pakistan's conceptual obstinacies, question its spatial and temporal constitutions, but also insist against the tyranny of its further straight or dominant narration (Kasmani 2023, 152). In other words, desire is that willful affect, which in this gathering of a book—a *mehfil* as Anjali Arondekar calls it in her afterword—binds us in shared purpose and queer companionship.

We proceed in the knowledge that Pakistan, by many a geopolitical measure and argument, is a minoritized form. The contributions in this volume, however, seek to rethink its epistemological value: they reconfigure its cartography in historically and spatially expansive terms and gather supplementary modes of being queer. In a sense, our quest is not one that

can be satisfied by the facile statement, *look, Pakistan is also queer!* The introduction of an asterisk—Pak*stan—as part of the conceptualization of this volume has served to stretch, also trouble or make capacious, the idea of the modern nation-state to open it up to shifting conditions and plural possibilities. Composed of two parts, the latter *stan*, from Persian, denotes land or dominion. Pakistan means *land of the pure*. Its cognate in Sanskrit, *asthana*, refers as much to a geographical place, abode, or residence as to one's social location or physical disposition: more precisely, *asthana* is the act of standing. This is also what ties stan to its proto-Indo-European form, preserved in the German verb *stehen*, to stand. In fact, the English words *state* and *status* or the German word for city, *Stadt*, are also related. Its Urdu variation *astana* means home, dwelling, a place of rest or in Sufi terms, a shrine and a threshold. As suffix in place names—Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Rajasthan—stan can furnish geographies with an encumbrance if not also a temporal backwardness, a *standing* so to speak disadvantageously ascribed to Muslim nations of Central, West, and South Asia. Rescripted, **stan*, whether as place, standing, or position, names a greater historical situatedness though no longer moored to an idea of territory: **stan* is desirous stand, an affective posture so to speak, a threshold to speak from.

And so, here comes another claim: *Pak*stan*, at once a particular place and a capacious geopolitical form, folds into its very idea historical, cultural, and political complexities and unevenness. Such line of thinking isn't entirely solitary. Writing on the trajectories, utopias, and dreams of the Left in colonial South Asia, the historian Ali Raza notes that by the 1940s, Pakistan had become “a concept on which a dizzying array of socio-political aspirations could be projected” (2021, 237). In other words, even before Pakistan existed as a physical place, it existed as a node of desire: it was a “tool,” a “tactic” whose “deliberate vagueness” made it both potent and elastic, and whose strength, as Raza notes, “lay in its emotive appeal and in its flexibility to incorporate a potentially vast array of imaginations and interpretations” (2021, 237). With such affective volumes in place, **stan* folds out the issue of land by way of complex historical and uneven interrogation. It also helps mobilize, queerly and malleably, the place's alternate imaginings and future-making. Our quest, more precisely, is the following: What might we accomplish if we are to read Pakistan not as a bounded nation-state, but rather an unusual gathering of affective geopolitics, or a hard-to-pin-down postcolonial and geopolitical form that by virtue of its orientation to vibrant Islamic cultures of

West and Central Asia cannot be neatly folded into a straight history of South Asia? Embracing both its singularity and plural orientatedness, we trouble the square and standard historicization of Pakistan as context and idea. With queer ancestors, we go astray; through queer histories, we seek other origin stories. Whether venturing wayward or sideways, we explore narrative pathways that for instance are not moored to the violence of its partition from India in 1947 or do not habitually return to a linear narration of Islam in South Asia (see Rajani, Patel, Tariq, this volume).¹ In exploring and articulating otherwise ways to think in and from Pakistan, we also question, for instance, “whether queer history is always only a history of queer activism (narrowly defined, gay rights and so on). Or can we desire more capaciously, a history of queerness per se, that makes space for and is made up of, differently alternate ways of being queer in the world?” (Kasmani 2022, 154). Here, queer doesn’t begin with a catalytic event but nests in the everyday intricacies of life. It follows that the languages, bodies, materials, and archives that authors bring forth are not simply of value to the study of Pakistan or relevant only to discussions within South Asian studies—that too, of course—but more critically, we embrace the position that such gathering in locations of the Global South carries epistemic consequences for queer *mehfils* elsewhere.

Pakistan Desires takes up local or alternate imaginaries and translates them into the idiom of queer scholarship. One of the urgent tasks then that the volume assigns itself is to bring attention to constellations, volumes, archives, and genealogies of queer that unfortunately remain underconsidered if not entirely lost to an English-speaking scholarship. Part of our proposition is that through such labors, some of that important archive refractingly finds its way in the volume through translations, citations, ethnographic detail, and wayward modes of reading, thinking and listening. We also claim that some of these contributions are groundbreaking insofar as our authors are culling and creating knowledge in a field that does not yet exist. In these and other ways, this book is embroiled in the politics of knowledge production: not only does this sharpen perhaps an already strained relationship between queer culture and scholarship; it warrants the admission that Global South scholars remain implicated in the power structures, systems, and institutions of the Global North. Furthermore, we write in the knowledge that foundational queer scholarship is but slowly recovering from an earlier and now questioned assumption that there is no geography to theory. *Pakistan Desires* situates itself in the

growing body of “scholarship that strives to think conceptually and comparatively from, rather than simply to write empirically about, the region” (Zamindar and Ali 2020, 10). A more critical aim at hand is to unsettle the impression that some queer cultures are more amenable to idealization, more translatable into scholarship than others. By articulating distinct inheritances of queer and by pursuing its more-than-secular orientations, we point to further ways in which “marginalities within queerness are rendered as elsewheres geopolitically, institutionally, and temporally even in queer scholarship” (Roy et al. 2023, 3).

The individual chapters and collective figurations of this volume, on the one hand, consider, tackle, and enfold the intellectual and cultural diversity that a singular setting like Pakistan offers. There are no less than sixteen official languages spoken in the country. On the other hand, the multicoded genealogies of nonnormative desire and gender variance become present in the volume and are made to travel and translate through refractions of affect, language, and history. To the extent that the past and present expressions of queerness we explore in the expansive context we call Pak*stan “reveal the regulatory mechanisms and resistant forces foreclosed or enabled by a shifting set of geopolitical conditions and related epistemologies” (Henry 2020, 8), we seek narrative and epistemological possibilities for queer lives and loves that cannot correlate to or fall outside the purview of dominant scholarship. Thinking queer is a striving to formulate ways to think in, with, beyond but more critically, alongside the quagmire of a Western-Europe-and-North-America centering queer and affect studies. It engages Pakistani cultural and historical experiences of nonnormative desire and gender variance for a critique of queer thinking and histories of sexuality. It also moves across disciplinary lines and temporal frames so as to find and foreground ecologies of knowledges that are discredited by dominant ways of knowing or have been removed from historical view.

In a recent issue of *Words without Borders*, as part of their introduction to the anthology of *Urdu Feminist Writing* (Alvi et al. 2020), authors forgo the aim of creating a new, rival canon; rather, in gathering such writing’s “many different faces, tones, concerns, and aesthetics,” they “celebrate multiple, noncanonical perspectives.” Through the necessary work of translation, they also orient us to new or previously disfavored idioms (Sufi

or *Sufiana* in their usage) within feminist writing as a critical practice of “unmaking.” Like them, we conceive this collection as a *provisional space* for diverse bodies and voices to gather, engage, learn, translate and cross-act, make and unmake in queer company. In other words, a great deal of what this volume achieves and articulates is precisely through gathering. One might also say that as a constellation of various voices, aspirations, and views, our response is not so much a singular line of argument as it is a diversely un/folding perspective. The critical work of gathering and collecting we do in this volume is also intently political insofar as we put forth our stories and histories, our lives and loves to serve as not only the object but the very ground for queer theorization. A good illustration of this claim of ours or how a place might serve as a site of critical re/gathering or un/making of queer is given in the volume’s readiness to fold in religious inheritances and spiritual subtexts of queer, as several of our contributors do, especially through the region’s vast reserve of Sufi-cultural idioms, archives, texts, and contexts.² In desiring and seeking expansively, the volume generates equivalences that do not yet exist, most pronounced in how queer traffics through poetics and hermeneutics of Islam. It follows that gathering “queer futures elsewhere” as the subtitle of the volume suggests is a regathering of queer in con/figurations that do not comfortably fit in Euro-American genealogies or that too often sit jaggedly with its secular, if not also Christian, orientations.

In a poem entitled *Nirman* (1994)—meaning neither man nor woman—the Pakistani-American literary figure and self-professed “first Urdu gay poet,” Iftikhar Nasim (1946–2011), inhabits a religious template to create queer equivalences. “Here is my revelation / a woman completes another woman / man is the other half of man.”³ He evokes the particular Sufi notion of *kashf* to speak of his radical corporeal un/becoming, what for Sufis is privileged inner knowledge, acquired through mystical experience and often through a direct vision of God. In declaring the self as neither man nor woman, the poet is made free of dualisms and through yet another Sufi metaphysic, *fana’* (annihilation), declares becoming divine: “I am complete Creator.” However, transgressive, queer desire thus embedded in sacred aesthetics cannot be taken as simply antagonistic to religion; rather, it is complexly conversant with it. In fact, scholars of Islam, too, have varyingly illustrated how betraying or subverting Islamic-religious code forms part of a religious ethos prevailing in Sufi con/texts at least since the eleventh century (Ahmed 2016; Ewing 1997; Karamustafa 2006). In other words, queer desire thus conceived and explored can

be both an *inclination* toward the divine and a *continuation* of historically given possibilities of living an otherwise life.⁴

Queer con/texts like the poem above serve as critical openings that this volume takes up. In fact, the work of exploring other genealogies and archives demands that we read desire in a wider social and interpretive frame, which in this case includes its complex workings with sacred aesthetics and religious affect.⁵ For instance, Syma Tariq's contribution in this volume articulates queer-political desire through an unstable listening of the poem *We Shall Witness* by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, which notwithstanding its overtly Islamic-religious vocabulary serves as a communist and feminist anthem of protest in both contemporary Pakistan and India. Syeda Momina Masood's reflection on queerness in this volume is entangled with female spaces of religious devotion. And Shayan Rajani takes on the idea of the beloved, creating equivalences between loving God and loving men. Whether in unequivocal terms or through implicit overtures, several of the authors question "the theoretical emphases and epistemological assumptions" through which we come to know sexuality, its objects and history (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008, vii). At the same time, such attentiveness to alternate universes and the pasts they bear and from where we might cull value in the present is attendant with the hope that such moves uncover pathways for a kind of theoretical forgetting and moving on that Arondekar and Patel have called for in their critique, "Area Impossible" (2016, 159). The multifolded response we articulate through gathering is not in service of making queer slick or more slippery than it already is; rather, following Kadji Amin (2017, 183), our intent is to figure the following: What are those different affective histories or historical affects that give body to queer elsewhere; what sticks to it, what adheres or is shed in such process; how it is developed, deployed, or what happens to it as it takes on life in new or hitherto underconsidered contexts—fields, places, settings, disciplines, geopolitical areas, conceptual and demographic locations? Potentially then, as a place desires, it queers away, so to speak, "the sedimented conditions that constitute what is in place in the first place" (Gordon 2008, 4). So long as queerness is "a doing for and toward the future" (Muñoz 2009, 1), we understand and explore desire as a queer affordance so long as desirous acts lay the ground for other ways of doing place; or to the extent that shared fields of desire help disrupt or intervene into the place's crystallizing pasts and presents; or insofar as such desires' awkward rhythms and less than ordinary refrains afford futures other than those given, prescribed, or inherited.

To embark on queer thinking in and from Pakistan, unlikely as it may first seem and sound, is in many ways timely. Recent years have witnessed the extraordinary introduction of additional gender categories in the national identity database and a state-backed landmark move toward transgender rights (locally *khwajasara*, *khwaja sira*). In May 2018, Pakistan's parliament passed into law the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, regressively amended in 2023.⁶ Equally significant if not widely known are more grassroots developments like the quiet emergence of a queer film festival, a steady center-staging of sexual identity in Pakistani art practice, and several transgender-led initiatives across the country's urban centers. Challenges abound and gains are fragile: anti-trans sentiment is on the rise and violence shadows the lives of queers and other minorities in Pakistan. Thinking queer in these conditions also allies with increasingly controversial mobilization of the Aurat (Women's) March and feminist-organized occupation of public space;⁷ it accompanies a new abundance of on- and offline intimacies through dating apps as much as it seeks historical resonance in the country's Sufi-religious heritage. It is also tied to creative forms and artistic practices that offer diverse and affect rich modes through which the country's queer and gender-variant persons are finding ways of becoming present and public both at home and beyond it. At a time when community-based movements, queer-creative practices, HIV and health initiatives, rights-oriented activism, and transnational networking and global discourse on LGBTQIA*+ are recontouring local idioms of belonging and invigorating forms of queer political participation in the public sphere, this volume introduces a set of critical conversations that are gradually gaining ground in Pakistan.⁸ Its essays gesture at the ways in which in the not-yet-here of queerness (Muñoz 2009), Pakistan, notwithstanding the repression and violence of its present, can be understood as a site of critical thinking, imagination, and inquiry.

Authors also know well that a queer conversation in and on Pakistan is new. While queer as a term of reference and claim-making is gaining salience, in particular through literary writing, social movements, and more consistently in film and the fine arts, its reception in Pakistan-centered social sciences research has been slow.⁹ In this sense, the chapters evoke if not also navigate an emergent landscape while enabling a much-desired conversation across fields and disciplines. Our engagement with the term queer isn't a flat, outright, or uncritical embracing; rather, it is a response

that is acutely aware how its reception in Pakistan, warranting translation, is complexly configured or that it involves shades of skepticism, mistrust, resistance, even refusals. Or that even in instances of its adoption, the term is open to being con/tested, eschewed, stretched, appropriated, and repurposed. Hence, in various ways, authors have sought to think queer broadly, to carry the term beyond the limited frame of sexual identity and lifestyle, to allow room for a critique of power, especially in cases where terms and concepts are “inadequate to the task of representing the polyglot histories that they are made to bear” (Traub 2008, 12). The fact that some of the chapters in this volume engage material and archives that are not entirely metropolitan, comfortably secular, or even gay, or are in excess to the dominant cultural-linguistic spheres of Urdu and English, makes it possible to conjure up queer from less likely, possibly alternate universes or “to think of queer futures in locations where they ostensibly have no collective pull” (Arondekar 2020, 3). Similarly, while *affect* is not a term that contributors explicitly engage with, it is present nonetheless via the register of desire. One might view it as the critical background against which an “ensemble of practices, involvements, relations, capacities, tendencies and affordances” can take shape and meaning across chapters of the volume (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 8). It is a reminder that affect, whether called out or not, is given in the ordinary gathering of elements “a gangly accrual” of forms, rhythms, and refrains in Kathleen Stewart’s terms (2010, 339), and which in this volume, inhere in context and traverse texts. Proceeding thus and regardless of terms, references, and categories that might be relevant to contributors’ scholarship, their fields of research, and their interlocutors, these inquiries remain broadly interested in political imagination and future-making within contexts of marginality, resistance, plurality, and intersectionality, that is to say politically charged and feeling-driven responses to normative structures in Pakistan. This enables a range of views and perspectives to find place and hold ground in the book.

GATHERINGS

Several contributions in this volume deal with desires that center around issues of time, history, and archives. Others are similarly drawn to ideas of geography, territory, boundaries, and borderlands. Attendant with encumbered geographies and retrograde temporalities, **stan* reminds us that

histories are after all affective mobilizations in place. Put another way, to think of what has come to pass or be is to consider how time unfolds before us now, the histories we face in place or ones we encounter and dialogue with in the present. It is thus of critical importance to this volume that time is not rendered separate from space in the organization of the chapters, which neither pursue a one-way, backward orientation to the past. Similarly, essays are not singled out on the basis of genre or form. In fact, authors engage a range of interdisciplinary modes and methods. These involve close rereading of textual sources, visual storytelling and analysis, creative nonfiction and poetry, sonic listening, ethnographic fieldwork, and archival research and historical study. In her closing reflection, Anjali Arondekar (<251>, this volume) evokes the Arabic-Persian-Urdu concept of *mehfil*—assembly, celebration, forum—to indicate how such gathering “summons publics into lives of conversation and proximity, at once a place of frenzied engagement and quiet meditation.” Embracing her call to gather in affection, the chapters of this book are presented in two clusters, one big *mehfil*. That texts appear in certain company should not take away from the fact that themes, modes, and sensibilities are also shared across gatherings, or that readers will discover their own resonances, continuities, and intimacies, hopefully above and beyond those outlined in this introduction.

“Of Girls, Desire, and Sacred Things” makes for a perfect opening to this volume. Syeda Momina Masood’s sharp yet meditative writing compels us to face the distinct scopes and shapes that thinking queerness in Pakistan entails and offers. Masood turns to women’s sacred and intimate worlds to comment on the queers in failure and the failings of queerness: “I can’t speak of desire without speaking of sacred things” (<26>, this volume), she notes, evoking affinities and equivalences between sacrality and sexuality. In what is a part-memoir, part-manifesto mode, Masood invites her readers to envision queerness in ways that remain largely unaccommodated in, if not also unimagined by, theory. Here, queer refuses as much as it is refused. Or, being queer or named such intersects with normativities of class and ethnicity; it flourishes in the space of separation, to lean on her formulation, “through strange little sacred rituals” (26) that are directed at other women, female saints as well as God. A most fitting follow-up comes in the shape of “Loving Men, Loving God.” Shayan Rajani’s expansive reflection

engages multiple Sufi figures across historical time and space. In reading Sufi biographical accounts and dictionaries (*tazkiras*), Rajani takes to his historical task overlapping notions of cross-faith and same-sex love. Without giving in to the seductions of types and identities—Hindu, Muslim, gay, straight—he identifies distinct ethics of love and intimate modes of mutual transformation, a kind of moving toward each other through the space of separation. So astute is this intellectual move in the between of categories that it also forgoes an impulse for periodization. The account that Rajani crafts is rendered aslant to time to skillfully accommodate, to quote the author's claim, "past's desire to make its own future" (31, this volume). What's more is that the account Rajani crafts serves as a historical mirror for his own desires and politics in present-day Pakistan.

In "Fixed Possibilities," Pasha M. Khan identifies both an unsettled and unsettling transness through his reading of the mid-nineteenth-century Urdu tale of Prince Agar. Here, the protagonist is a transmasculine figure assigned female at birth. And the genre, *qissah*, or what Khan contingently defines as a tale of possibilities, is in fact a queer ecology that unfolds through narration. Transgressions abound as do transformations; kinship works across species and against heteropatriarchy. Yet Khan parses a cautious telling. His careful deliberations on fixity and transness compel the reader to consider what precisely is at stake here and for whom; what temptations and obstinacies do historical forms present; how or when might we rightfully celebrate these as queer; what transancestor-making potentials and desires come attached with the tale; or, broadly speaking, how might we critically assess our own affective relations to past archives and the work of their parsing in the present? A comparable discussion of limits is differently evoked through filmic desire in "Spaces of Critique, Spaces of Desire." In a thoroughly intersectional reading of gender with class, language, and ethnicity, Gwendolyn S. Kirk analyzes three Pakistani films—two in the Punjabi language and one in Urdu. She focuses on the films' gender-crossing and gender-bending performances, their overall treatment of sexuality and instances where distinctions between homosociality and homosexuality are hard to uphold or imagine. These films, as she critically notes, are not closed texts, but complex sites of critique and play; "they open up rare spaces for subversion of gender norms, for crossing the normative limits of desire, and for critique of the heteropatriarchy" (78, this volume). And yet, she observes how these remain "productive sites for both queer and heteronormative desire" (66,

this volume). Inasmuch as the undermining of norms here is not limited to gender, the space to do so also exceeds the narrative arcs of the films. Kirk additionally points the reader to the films' queer affordances, which is to think of these as affective archives, or the interpretive possibilities, agencies, and potentials that can and do arise as viewers and scholars interact with these cinematic texts.¹⁰

In "Partitioned Listening," Syma Tariq refigures the Partition of British India as a "sonic condition" and queers its historical narrativization from a place of unstable diasporic listening. She asks "how, as partitioned subjects, can and do we listen?" (84, this volume). Focusing on the Pakistani Communist Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem, *Hum Dekhenge* (We Shall Witness), and folding public history, family archives, and fictive truths, she articulates a temporal continuum through listening that ties the poem's iconic rendering in the female voice of Iqbal Bano in 1986 (in Lahore) to its new life as an anthem for feminist movements in India, especially popular in the recent protests of 2019 (in Delhi). Tariq's intellectual labors of listening to the event of the Partition, a form of counter listening, not only troubles the colonial division of geography but also unsettles the straight ways in which we separate and compartmentalize the past, the present, and the future. In "Miraji's Poetics for Queering History," Geeta Patel invites her readers to tarry with an affective between-ness featuring two historically removed literary figures, or "wanderers," as she calls them. Miraji, a twentieth-century Urdu modernist poet in Lahore, and Sappho, a seventh-century Greek lyricist, are brought together in the space of *hamdardī*, literally, sharing pain. Here, translation, just as her own writing performs, is foreplay. It is not invested in returning safe and secured but is rather a transiting course that involves moments of mislaying, misplacing, forgetting, and lapsing, a "finding en route to remembering," as she calls it (102, this volume). Such intent for something else, something more than, helps the reader understand what she means when she asks, "how might we queer the desires we invest in queer archives?" (114). It is through such forgetful moves and finding through wayfaring that Patel assembles but also performs an affective theory of history, archives, and translation from the Global South.

The *mehfil* ascends with a visual essay by Nael Quraishi. "This Is Home after All" explores diasporic homemaking not through the lens of being away or beyond but through affections and intimacies of the in-between and the also-here. Here home is not a place but an affective imbrication: Quraishi juxtaposes by way of collaging that what is visually familiar across disparate geographies, Pakistan and the Netherlands. The result is a compound

scenography, images layered with worded reflection, a form of remembering through picturing, or making present what is removed or left behind.

Pivoting the book's two gatherings is an interlude in verse. In the poem "After Heather Love, and Others," Asad Alvi conjures up a bilingual space of queer affect across languages, Urdu and English. Memory rises up and an affective kin-making unfolds. Not only does Alvi tie theory with poetry, two epistemic worlds sometimes seen as oppositional; verses fold ideas of *gham* (sadness) in Urdu poets Ghalib and Josh with Heather Love's notion of feeling backward.

The *mehfil* resumes with Vanja Hamzić's chapter on the distinct and shared experiences of temporality among Pakistan's gender nonconforming communities (*khwajasara*). In "Temporal Nonconformity," he reflects on how a being-there-together for *khwajasara* involves idiosyncratic, multi-directional time-making but also altogether otherworldly temporalities. Examining the processes of distemporalization and through reflections on communal experience, the chapter points to the varied ways in which a specifically Pakistani gender-nonconforming subjectivity—a space and a time of their own—is forged while sharing at the same time memories and performances from a greater South Asian and Muslim historical context. Such desirous re/turn to historical subjectivities reveals, in Hamzić's own words, "some potentially productive tensions between present-day *khwajasara* and *hijra* views of the(ir) past and those of the(ir) historians" (127). In yet another compelling portrait of local transgender communities, Claire Pamment's ethnographic study reveals the complex involvement of *khwaja sira* individuals in the Tablighi Jamaat, an Islamic missionary movement. "On the Other Side of the Rainbow?" discusses transgender performances of piety and repentance that overlap with bodied and discursive processes of "detransitioning." Pamment argues that alongside their investment in community work, civil rights initiatives, and transnational LGBTQI+ networks, such individuals explore and find "a multiplicity of pious, political and/or aesthetic possibilities" (147) through their religious affiliations though outside normative ideals of queer possibility.¹¹

A desire for venturing out can also be observed in "A Queer History of Pakistani Art." Abdullah Qureshi outlines an artistic trajectory of male erotic representation through the work of the contemporary painter Anwar Saeed (b. 1955). Across a visual practice spanning four decades, Qureshi locates depictions of classed masculinity and homoerotic desire that traverse conventions of Western art and local ecologies of spiritual-

ity and sexuality. The chapter establishes how such desire and its visual representation, in the artist's terms of reference, exceed but also resist "Western" labels such as gay or queer. Such considered refusals or going beyond—"other ways of love"—reveal at best a search for genealogies that are not removed from grounded realities, or which, if and when articulated, promise to mobilize a specific historical experience of desire. Striking a similar chord in the present is "Beyond Hooking Up." Ahmed Afzal observes how digitally mediated engagements on social networking and dating apps such as Grindr are impacting constructions of sexuality and desire in urban Pakistan when it comes to intimacies and relationships among gay and bisexual men. As Afzal observes, given the absence of gay public life, online dating and networking provide critical forms of care, sociality, community, and identity-building. Weaving private reflection with ethnographic fieldwork, Afzal crafts for his readers a scenography of digital intimacies: we come to appreciate how users variously explore these networks to realize their sexual fantasies, to refashion their identities along gay cosmopolitan lines, or to simply deal with loneliness, even violence, all this while having to negotiate familial expectations or the conflicting pull to abide by religious or societal heteronorms.

A poignant parallel to male desire and men's intimate worlds of the previous two chapters is to be found in Nida Mehboob's visual essay "How I Like It." Titled after the documentary film of the same name from which the essay is also derived, it captures the extraordinary ways in which women in the film speak of, and describe, their sexual fantasies involving men and other women. Mehboob's film unsettles the silence on women's sexualities in Pakistan while also preserving it for the viewer. Women are not captured—at least not visually; instead, the camera contrastingly focuses on male bodies, intimacies, and socialities in Pakistani public space. The affective dissonance that results is intentional: women's voices and desires are juxtaposed with the film's masculine imagery. Composed of stills from the film, the short sequences—images and the spoken text assembled—afford a rare view into women's intimate lives and loves in a sexually repressive, often hostile, social and material environment.

The final duo of chapters in the volume reinscribe a beyondness of territory and geography that among other things is recorded by the asterisk in the particular conjuring that is Pak*stan. Reflecting on her fieldwork in Chicago from the early 2000s, Gayatri Reddy offers a retrospective account of *desi* gay men's desire for communal and sexual belonging in the diaspora. With a mix of ethnography and microhistory, "Queer *Desi*

Formations” tackles imaginations of community as these intersect with normativities of sexuality, ethnicity, and class in America. Revolving around the Pakistani diasporic figure of Iftikhar Nasim, or Ifti, an Urdu gay poet and Chicago socialite, Reddy observes the boundaries and expansions of cultural belonging beyond the nation while asking how racialized/brown queers “articulate and negotiate their subject position in the public arenas/narratives of (white) gay cosmopolitanism in the U.S.” (217). Closing the desirous mehfīl is a spectacular meditation on the queerness of geography and gender. “Queer in a Time of Kashmir” identifies but also opens an insightful space of dialogue between the historic conflict over Kashmir and the discourse on transgender rights and politics in South Asia. Through entangled themes of self-determination and sovereignty, Jeffrey A. Redding observes how the uncertain implications of transgender rights echo a history of Pakistan’s originally bifurcated, possibly also weird, imagination as a national space—across eastern and western wings, now Bangladesh and Pakistan. Insofar as queerness, as Redding observes, “is also about non-intuitive understandings and configurations of social and political power” (238), the chapter illustrates an affective resonance between territorial disputes and the historical and spatial incongruities that accompany the work of demarcating sovereignty and community in Pakistan and South Asia.

OPENINGS

Pakistan Desires takes up Arondekar and Patel’s (2016) invitation for non-Euro-American epistemes and engages the politics of queer and area studies as coincident (152–54). As they make plain, the project is not simply adding queer to area (153). Rather, to tackle “geopolitical flattenings in queer studies” (155) and seek queer hermeneutics that refuse—through modes of forgetting—“the seductions of homing devices, of theoretical pathways that suture geopolitics to forms (refused or otherwise) of region, area, nation” (159). With cross-cutting interests in affects of language, location, and histories, this collection is a re/membering through forgetting in that it invites reflection on what meanings adhere to queer in Pakistan or what might it mean to speak from here—a *stan—where here stands in for places rendered elsewhere to queer thinking. As Anjali Arondekar (2020) notes in her returning thoughts on *Queer Futures*—one of the events from which this volume proceeds—“Pakistan is as much the minoritized and fetishized geography within South Asia as is South Asia in globalized histories of

sexuality” (3). It follows that our attentiveness to left-behind, bypassed locations such as Pakistan—“places that are inherently non-recuperative, not discovered (again)” (4) ought to disturb settled habits of theorizing and politicizing sexuality. It is also to say that our investment in the question of location isn’t a search for an autochthonous figure of the queer in Pakistan. Neither is it to confirm queer epistemes or idealities by merely transposing these in a different geopolitical location—historical and archival labors carried out in reparative or recuperative spirit or that seek to anachronistically restore queerness to non-Western histories and contexts (see Khan, this volume). It is in fact driven by a geopolitical pursuit whereby queerness is not located/locatable in one place any more than it is situated in another, which is to say “that it is not in any way more here than there, more now than before; that it is tied to the logic of cities and secularities in a way that it is unmappable in religious or non-metropolitan life-worlds” (Kasmani 2019, 36). Pursuing queerness in relation to place is, on the one hand, to temper, an analytical overemphasis on subject formation or queer identitarian discourse and, on the other, to privilege, how queerness worlds in the persistence of affect, rhythms, and refrains that insist against the tyranny of straight place, in this case, Pakistan. At the same time, the oversights we highlight, the blind spots we address, and the kinds of interventions we undertake by reading “other historical modes of same-sex sexuality, cross-gender identification, and nonnormative intimacies” (Henry 2020, 4) will hopefully also resonate with other locations.

Across many conjurings, Pak*stan in this volume emerges as a world in which we can locate ourselves, yet it is one that cannot be folded back to singular or exclusive frames of belonging. This, on the one hand, bolsters the view that “the nation and the nation-state are always tentative and ambiguous, one location in a complex of competing narratives of attachment and belonging” (Zamindar and Ali 2020, 10). On the other, its polyvocal routes and more-than-local shapes echo both the ambition and the methodology that Asad Ali and Kamran Asdar Ali propose in their introduction to *Towards Peoples’ Histories of Pakistan* (2023): “to shift away from the singularity of the nation state” (1) and to stay attentive to forgotten pasts and othered subjects, “inaudible in the grand narratives of national history” (7). Such moves are lined with the hope that together we arrive at something different from the sticky, now weary ways in which Pakistan has come to be viewed and understood. At the same time, *Pakistan Desires* as a queer *mehfil* resists capture or intelligibility through standardized framings of discipline and area. This said, we take

joy in the fact that this queer volume is a first for Pakistan. The conversation, emergent and particular as it might be, is nonetheless able to draw from fields as diverse as history, anthropology, law, literature, art, film, and performance studies. Given the volume's disciplinary range, one promise lies in reading queer from multitheoretical, intersectional perspectives while opening up the contours of queer theory itself to unlikely sites of dialogue. Beyond its regional interest, we hope this endeavor is equally critical for conversations in the field of queer studies. Finally, this gathering of ours—of scholars and scholarship—is, by many means, groundbreaking, if not also timely. Given the want of research on the subject as well as the area, such effort, as readers will appreciate, is also ambitious to begin with. Precarities loom large, institutional support is scarce for such research in Pakistan, and interviews and interlocutors are hard to find. Scholars are themselves vulnerable, at risk. Our shared aim, despite our divergent attachments, is to invigorate a conversation where there is little, to intervene in local structures and global institutions of knowledge-making, to insist on other possibilities of queer, to find new allies, to tell less-told stories of places we inhabit or come from, and, above all, to do so in familiar and queer company.

NOTES

- 1 For history of the Partition, see Zamindar 2010.
- 2 Such articulation of desire between historically disinclined analytical objects, queer and religion, is distinct from Islamizing queer or queering Islam. For more on the politics of reading religion and queer, see the coda in Kasmani 2022.
- 3 Author's translation from Urdu into English.
- 4 For an Islamic politics of religious-social deviance in a Sufi historical context, see the introduction in Kasmani 2022.
- 5 For same-sex desire and the erotic in Islam, see Mian 2019; on Sufi desire, intimacy, and corporeality, see Kugle 2007, Shaikh 2012, and Bashir 2011. Notable studies include Scott Kugle's monograph on saints' bodies and desire (2007), Vanja Hamzić's research on sexual diversity in the Muslim world (2016), and the volume *Islamicate Sexualities* edited by Babayan and Najmabadi (2008).
- 6 On the governance of sexuality, transgender rights, and activism in Pakistan, see Redding 2015, Toor 2011, Khan 2019, and Kasmani 2021. On colonial and

decolonial perspectives on transgender in South Asia, see Dutta and Roy 2014 and Hinchy 2019.

- 7 On the recent controversies and reactions about the Women's March in Pakistan, see Khatri 2020.
- 8 These lines of thought also spring from two events that have centered queer issues in relation to Pakistan: a panel at the 26th European Conference of South Asian Studies in Paris (July 2018) titled "Pakistan Desires: Queer Futurities of the Urban" and the conference "Queer Futures: Politics/ Aesthetics/ Sexualities" at the Gurmani School of Humanities and Social Sciences, LUMS University in Lahore (March 2019). To expand the scope of the edited volume beyond the proceedings of the aforementioned events, more scholars were invited with new themes in mind.
- 9 Research on queer women's lives and loves in Pakistan has been hard to identify and include. An emphasis on gay male life is also tempered by essays on transgender communities of Pakistan as well as by contributions that take a nonmale-centered stance.
- 10 For more on desire in Pakistani films, see Zamindar and Ali 2020.
- 11 On pious performance, religious ideas, and lexicon in transgender movement, see also Pamment 2019; on spirituality among *khwaja-sira*, see Jaffer 2017.

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