

*Omar Kasmani, editor*

# Pak<sup>\*</sup>istan

QUEER FUTURES  
ELSEWHERE

# Desires

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

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Anjali Arondekar

## Afterword

### Everywhere *Mehfil*

Show and tell. Search and rescue. A collection on geopolitics and sexuality faces the inevitable question of its relevance. Are its locations new, undeciphered, unfree, shiny fodder for the diversity mill? Are its exemplars adequately queer, inadequately represented, and ultimately translatable? There may be journeys, but at stake are destinations. Are we there yet?

What happens if we eschew such habits of capture, rendition, and circulation? What happens if sexuality is a gathering, a provocation of genres and spaces and tongues, of multilingual encounters and spiritual forays? To transact the geopolitical then is to enter the everywhere *mehfil*, a quotidian coupling of place and pleasure, of form and friction, of call and response. A *mehfil*, after all, is a Hindustani term (gifted through Urdu, Arabic [*mahfil*], and Persian) that summons publics into lives of conversation and proximity, at once a place of frenzied engagement and quiet meditation. From its early invocations as a space of courtly performance to its more recent iterations as assembly, celebration, forum, the *mehfil* has always been a terrain of paradoxical potentiality: infused with secrecy and sexuality, yet decidedly public and performative.<sup>1</sup>

I have returned often to the concept-metaphor of *mehfil* as I imagined a response to this timely and efflorescent collection, *Pakistan Desires*. After all, I encountered many of its interlocutors at one such raucous *mehfil* in Lahore in 2019, otherwise known as the first queer conference to be

held in Pakistan. I was there to give a keynote on my work on histories of sexuality and abundance, and found myself surrounded by a cacophony of theories, languages, and affects. While the organizers, Nida, Omar, and Kamran, sustained us with food, inspiration, and schedules, there was a general sense of convivial chaos settling in. Very little was agreed upon, even as more was said and learned each day.<sup>2</sup> Grumblings of elitism (the conference was held at a private, gated university) accompanied celebrations of unions, otherwise impossible in the beleaguered landscape that is contemporary Pakistan. Queer futures were summoned and jettisoned, queer pasts recuperated and corrupted even as the present forged a poetics of the political and the improbable. It was a *mehfil* like no other.

Akin to my experience of the Lahore Conference, this collection too is a riotous, messy, inviting, erudite, and engaging *mehfil*—a staged congeries of voices, visualities, and histories that refuses to settle into any mandated orders of knowledge. From pointed provocations to think between and beyond geo-objects (pace Pak\*stan) to renderings of Urdu aesthetics and prose, from cruisy whisperings of desire and dissent to joyous movements of sound and spirit, there is a sense that we are in thrall of an endless *mehfil*. Shall we re/join the action? I think it's time.

#### I: DOES THE THING EXIST?

Even as I write this, queer ideations of place, as Omar Kasmani writes in his elegant introduction, seem particularly urgent, especially as Pakistan, and indeed South Asia, remains within the stranglehold of rising authoritarianism, communalism, and staggering economic precarity. Pandemic horrors, endlessly corrupt political regimes, and environmental devastation make for futures that are anything but hopeful. What does it mean then to participate in an intellectual gathering of nonrecognition, to summon a space that eschews the subtractive (even extractive) failures and fantasies of such a historical present/presence? How does one exist in an elsewhere outside the grids of visibility tethered to secular and liberal logics of rights and reform? After all, as the contributors variously remind us, we are not here to find Pakistan's queer pasts, or to carve out clear (righteous and rights-infused) pathways to scripted, liberatory futures. Instead, the fourteen chapters in the collection treat queer axiomatically as geopolitical form and lineage, inviting us to think of Pakistan as a shifting, restless, lyrical landscape of time and space.

While the collection is clearly not invested in the evidentiary regimes and conventions of recuperative history, there is a central tension here: geography as fabulation merges with geography as value. Pakistan accrues value, even as Pakistan remains outside the scenes of queer representation. As such, each contribution—especially in the first section—does not merely excavate or summon queerness; rather, each response participates in a materialized dialectic between the registers of (lost) visibility and the hermeneutics of possibility. To be in Pakistan, one must traverse outside of the settled geographies of Pakistan and Euro-American queer studies. For Masood, Quraishi, and Rajani, the thing that does not exist (to recast Masood's words) unfolds in playfully serious fictions, versions of Pak\*stan's life story across cross-hatched imaginaries and memoirs of Sufi time and sacral spaces, within and beyond the nation-state. Others like Khan and Tariq turn to counter listening and telling tales/*qissahs* of queer learning that return us to the sounds and sensibilities of trans/histories and feminist revolution. While Patel voyages to the lyrical past to speak of the in-between entanglements of the Urdu poet Miraji and Sappho, Kirk turns to Pakistani cinema as a site of gender undoing and geopolitical critique. As we enter the queer worlds of Pak\*stan, vernaculars of history become fiction, as origin stories of queer/trans subjectivities that refuse the seductions of monumentalization.

#### II: A PLACE DESIRES

A central conceit of this *mehfil* is its plangent commitment to the infrastructure of "desire" as an archive of theoretical entailments that forges the idea of a queer Pak\*stan. The turn to desire as an idiom of opening invokes a continuous seeking, a looking for that requires more journeys than destinations. Pakistan is jettisoned as geo-object to make room for Pakistan as subject, rethinking the epistemological value immanent to geopolitics. Each essay demands roaming—literal, figurative, affective; the story of Pakistan is told in a subtlety of archives and genres that demand futures not yet assigned: these are the idioms particular to *Pakistan Desires*. What is at stake is less the well-rehearsed ritual combat of identitarian histories (LGBTQI, etc.) than the assemblage of queer/trans forms that gather only to disperse.

The second half of the collection specifically turns to border crossings (spatial, disciplinary, affective) as porous queer forms that extend histories of sexuality and gender across diasporas, communities, and occupations.

Less focused on archival hermeneutics than the first half, these essays suture Pakistan more with forms of dissent that refuse histories of stigmatization and/or valor. Hamzić and Pamment turn to the varied genealogies of the *khwajasara*, Pakistan's gender-nonconforming collectivities, that spread across divergent Islamic temporalities and ritual practices. Hamzić speaks to the tense and tender ties between *khwajasara* and *hijra* histories to think across partitions of thought and space, while Pamment's detailed ethnographies breathe life into the rich contradictions of *khwajasara* in an Islamic missionary movement, the Tablighi Jamaat. Qureshi, Mehboob, and Afzal combine the demands of aesthetic forms with the exigencies of virtual/visual desire, asking us yet again to think Pakistan outside the mandates of social and/or political realism. One challenge of curating a *mehfil* such as this one is that there will always be guests who rupture the space of invitation. For Reddy and Redding, the uneven burdens of territorial occupation and collective organizing make Pakistan a place forever in abeyance. Racial violence, territorial dispossession, affective estrangement often render gay/trans subjects visible at the very moment of their erasure.

There is of course much more to say here about the singular ambition of this raucous, multilingual, multimedia *mehfil* whose invitation to gather otherwise and elsewhere remains generatively opaque. Simply put, *Pakistan Desires* gives us more provocation than prescription, more content than category, folding us into archives and histories of writerly possibility. Desire here is method, inward to the imaginary territories of Pak\*stan, and outward to the global reaches of its material geographies. For just as no map can be full of straight lines and planes, no *mehfil* can convene without circling back to the unmet and unfinished possibilities of all who gather.

#### NOTES

- 1 Multiple genealogies of the *mehfil* can be traced across periods, fields, and geographies. For an etymology, see Edward Lane's excerpt in *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (1863). A select sampling of readings around the *mehfil* as a place of gathering, from courtesans in Mughal courts to urban music halls in colonial Bombay, are Katherine Brown (2006), Tejaswani Niranjana (2019), and Daniel Majchrowicz (2020). I thank Geeta Patel, Amina Mulla, and Shiraz Ansari for their assistance on the rich histories of the term.
- 2 For more on my meditations on the Lahore Conference, see Arondekar (2020).

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