ABSTRACT

The introductory essay lays the ground for this book, which is on the term “queer” and its circulation in the Global South. The term “queer” has a global reach and purchase today and we seek to map some of this in contexts of the Global South at two levels. The first is through offering genealogies of the term and its employments since its introduction in the public sphere in the US in 1990/91 and its travel in the US and outside in the subsequent one and a half decades at a conceptual level. This is also the time that many countries in the Global South opened themselves to the free market under a variety of signatures: liberalization, globalization, privatization and “queer” came along with this free market. We track the implications of this for academic engagement, politics and same-sex organizing, both conceptually and through introductions to various ethnographic sites that offer concrete manifestations of that engagement, politics and organizing.

From the early 1990s onward, there was afoot a figure in the world called the “global gay”. Dennis Altman coined the term (“Global Gaze/GLOBAL Gays”). In an essay from 1996 “Rupture or Continuity: The Internationalization of Gay Identities” (and latterly a book called Global Sex), Altman configured globalization as the process that brings together what he calls “tradition” – by which he means pre-modern, pre-colonial same-sex practices – and “modernity”, i.e. Western style identity politics (77, 79, 88). In doing so, he repeated a classic racialized and imperialist move of classifying the native as incapable of identity, only of practices, while the modern Western subject has identity, even as he cautions against ideas of Western superiority. Altman then
characterized globalization as the benign process that brings these two together to form a complete, dynamic whole, even as he critiques late capitalism (79). Both inform each other and grow together, he argued. The erasures in this move of different levels, despite his recognition of the uneven nature of globalization and late capitalism on the one hand, and sociological particularity on the other (his own essay and book ran though cultures as if they were objects on aisles in a global supermarket), are staggering in their implications.

In 2002, Joseph Massad wrote an essay called “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International” (and latterly a book called Desiring Arabs) in which he criticized precisely the Western imperialist flattening of the Arab world in accordance with categories with a Western provenance and the yoking of them into a Western-style understanding of sexuality and sexual identity. He accuses “queer” of, in fact, heterosexualising the planet and flattening the more variegated landscape of sexual desire in the Arab world (“Re-Orienting Desire” 382).

Between these two moments, the term “queer” had moved from its origins on the streets of New York in 1991 to a plethora of locations across the world. That it continues to have a powerful hold across the world with a variety of forces unwilling to relinquish it, is evident in the lack of critiques of Altman and the ferocious critiques of Massad. The latter have come as much from Queer Studies theorists as from academics from the Global South in the US global academy doubling up as native informants and supported by Queer Studies and other progressive academics. While there is much to critique in Massad, these critiques have been inattentive to the structure of Massad’s argument (Shad Naved in this volume begins a more careful account of Massad’s argument even as he differs from him in significant ways).

**The emergence of “queer”**
The word “queer” emerges in the context of US gay politics in the 1990s. It emerged as an activist term by groups like Queer Nation, a group of radical AIDS activists in New York. Queer Nation was a militant group with confrontational, Situationist-style modes of intervention. The group members were activists from ACT UP and were tired of the continuing discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS by the neoliberal, Reaganite dispensation and sickened by the continuing heteronormativity of mainstream culture in the US. This term quickly became popular and was appropriated not just by the popular media but also by academia, spawning the subfield of Queer Studies in US academia. At the time in the US, this was a liberating term for LGBT folk of color and many disenfranchised along varying axes not acknowledged by the predominantly white and by now mainstream gay movement.

How did this term travel from this specific context and reach the world over? In what ways is it appropriated, what are the skepticisms towards the concept and its valences, what are the contexts that complicate its routes? Isn’t this use of “queer”, as Neville