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Book Review

Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forever War

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September 11 2001 created a historical, political and social shock wave for the United States, with ripple effects spreading transnationally. Although colonial and imperial violence have been foundational to US nation-building for centuries, there is now a 'before 9/11' and 'after 9/11' that frames juridical practices, lawmaking, economic practices and military tactics. After nearly two decades, this 'forever war' logic has become normalised as 'common sense' in the national imaginary. Detention centres, enhanced interrogation, bypassing Congress to declare war, Guantanamo Bay—all extensions of US settler colonialism and globalised imperialism—are all almost too ordinary to make the news in 2020, as I write this review. Resisting this status quo and taking on post-9/11 modes of governance and violence, Ronak K. Kapadia enacts in *Insurgent Aesthetics* what he describes artists and their art as doing: creating possibilities to unmask and disrupt the forms of US war-making and nation-state-making that are co-constitutive, that feed into each other, that have disappeared and dispossessed uncounted numbers of black and brown bodies in the United States and abroad.

Although focused on aesthetics, this book could deepen discussions in a range of fields beyond art and art history, such as women's and gender studies, sociology, cultural studies, queer theories, military history, and critical race studies. For teaching purposes, though, Kapadia's analysis might be better suited for upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level students.

Insurgent Aesthetics highlights two powerful forces of dissident art as it challenges these forms of imperial governance: revelation and transformation. Artists show us the world as it is—'what's hidden in plain view' (188), such as the state's accumulation of quantitative, empirical information and its abstraction of this information into 'data'; its tyranny of the visual 'in elevated surveillance and global security policing programs' (81); and its necropolitical-biopolitical form of population control. Yet artists also present us with alternative ways to perceive what is and to imagine otherwise: they 'provide the designs for sensing other, more disobedient and arresting ways of being in the world' (190) through work that resists legibility within hegemonic political epistemologies. While art has certainly been used to promote state power and rationalise state violence (Antliff, 2007; Barringer and Flynn, 1998), Kapadia identifies a diverse group of creators across the world and insightfully shows how they challenge this power. Their insurgent aesthetics manifest in a range of forms—photography, watercolour, film, collage, mixed media, sound, performance and the artist's own body—and dare us to question common sense by building a queer calculus.

Key to Kapadia's analysis, a queer calculus is the practice of 'inhabiting another arithmetic (...) one that constructs a slantwise relation to how imperial warfare has been measured conventionally' (22). By turning toward

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the sensual and haptic, the silences and traces left by bodies, hauntings and the unquantifiable, artists speak back to the state by refusing to engage solely on its empirical, imperialist terms. This calculus warps hegemony also by starting with theories and activism from queers and feminists of colour, centring minoritised bodies and minoritarian consciousnesses, and recognising the intersectionality of privilege and power. Thus, the artists and scholars foregrounded in this book critique and create, knowing the simultaneity of multiple forms of dispossession that occur not just through the state's explicit declarations of war, but in the way it relies on structures like settler colonialism, heterosexism, racism, xenophobia and neoliberal capitalism to reproduce itself.

Particularly emblematic of the nation-state's post-9/11 imperial praxis is the drone. Drones enable a type of cartography—and thus of viewing—that flattens the contours of places and communities and perpetuates the presumption that 'the power to *see* [is] the power to *know* and to *dominate*' (69), which also bolsters the belief that 'I see, therefore it is'. Kapadia devotes an entire chapter to what he calls 'the drone age' because the view from above, or the 'god trick', is so essential to governance (Haraway, 1988; also see Chow, 2006). And the United States has taken this ocular-centricity to new heights. Surveillance from above and with visual technologies is ubiquitous, enabling state-sanctioned tracking and incarceration of black and brown bodies, who have become always-already 'internal' and 'external' enemies (56).

Despite this new(er) panopticon and its pervasiveness, the state cannot maintain total control. As Kapadia explains, artists are especially well-suited to find, exist in and deepen these cracks—through insurgent aesthetics. Part of their creative repertoire involves taking state-produced evidence and state-authorised technologies and queering them. For Wafaa Bilal, this means shifting the terrain of mapmaking and surveillance from the cold, the distant and the abstract to the tangible, pulsing, bloody, fallible site of his own body. On his back he had a tattoo artist ink a map made up of the names of Iraqi cities and different coloured dots that represent Iraqis and Americans killed since the United States invaded in 2003 (. . . *And Counting*). For another piece, he lived for thirty days in an installation in which people could remotely control a paintball gun and shoot at him with it (*Domestic Tension / How to Shoot an Iraqi*). Kapadia guides readers through the queer calculus Bilal enacts. Both pieces use various 'tools' of the state, including statistics, numbers, cameras, a gun, isolation and containment to reveal and critique the state's surveillance logic. They also indicate how individuals internalise and act out this ideology, at times self-directed, at times toward others. Central to them all? Corporeality. Exposing his body, literally breaking his flesh (open), Bilal performs 'tactical and haptic knowledge' through senses that displace visual hegemony, '[suggesting] another way of archiving and knowing the forever war' (93).

This practice of queerly manoeuvring (around) state logics and manipulating the materials and tools of the imperialist status quo involves creating 'warm data'. Kapadia draws from Mariam Ghani who construes warm data as 'the unquantifiable aspects of human life', as 'heat, intensity, vibration, feeling, tactility, energy, and affect' in contrast to the cold numerical measures the state uses, displacing the dominance of vision as a mode of knowing (107). The art and artists in Kapadia's archive 'warm' the data of empire in different ways. Ghani and Chitra Ganesh, who collaborated in *Index of the Disappeared*, are two exemplars. Their mixed-media, multi-site project appears in different forms and installations and draws from a range of materials. It integrates official (often highly redacted) documents from the military; the artists have interviewed detainees with a warm data questionnaire; Ganesh has painted watercolour portraits; its exhibits consist of posters, videos and neon signs in windows. Repurposing artifacts of war, Ghani and Ganesh highlight the violence that 'official' records perform while the warm data questionnaire and portraits reassemble the individuals targeted by the state—but with a slantwise view, not 'reproducing endless "pornotropic" depictions of detainees' but providing 'traces of the individual voices and stories, which otherwise disappear into the sea of data' (133). With his deft analysis, Kapadia explains how artists' words and work reflect and create warm data to expose state logics and provide other ways of knowing those whom the state targets and detains.

Bilal, Ganesh and Ghani, although visionary, focus primarily on the recent past and present of the post-9/11 US forever war, and often integrate actual pieces of this war into their creations. Most of the book highlights such art: we also learn about elin o'Hara slavick, who alters aerial-view maps of places targeted in US bombing campaigns; Rajkamal Kahlon's striking palimpsests, which layer detention and autopsy records from the US military with drawings that replicate imagery from medieval anatomy books; and the Visible Collective's use of photography to re-present people of colour who have been deemed 'enemies' of the US state.

Critique manifests in a future-oriented gaze, as well, as evidenced in Larissa Sansour's work. *Nation Estate*, for example, comprises a film and photography series that depicts Palestine as a futuristic, sterile, completely manufactured and completely controlled high-rise in which different floors and spaces stand in for 'real life' places (like the Mediterranean Sea, Bethlehem, Ramallah, Solomon's Pools). In this scenario, Kapadia explains, 'Palestinian people [have been] left with nowhere to build but up' (158). Assembled through absurdity, excess, hyperbole and sleek forms, this landscape draws attention to—reveals—the actual architecture of Israeli occupation. This form of Arabfuturism, as Kapadia describes it, offers an 'elsewhere and otherwise' to 'the present-day Israeli settler security state' (157). In other words, Sansour challenges the state not by demanding recognition,

inclusion or citizenship rights; rather her 'queer feminist dystopian vision' anticipates Palestinian survival beyond a neoliberal rights-based politic.

Here Arabfuturism gestures toward Afrofuturism, a speculative framework that centres African American diasporic experiences to expose and disrupt dominating ideologies and open possibilities for revolutionary transformation (Nelson, 2002: 9; also see Womack, 2013).[1] Invoking Arabfuturism allows Kapadia to point to the valences of imperialism and colonialism that have targeted two different groups of people, thus 'outlining the links between US and Israeli neoliberal security regimes' and the potential for 'fugitive alliances and radical forms of insurgent political consciousness between Palestine and Indigenous/Native futurisms and Afrofuturisms in the US/North America' (42).[2] Through this framework, he indicates that queer, aesthetically insurgent engagements with nation-state logic do more than critique. They also create capacity for new forms of kinship and political solidarity. In this respect, The Visible Collective offers another powerful intervention as they take up the techniques and devices of photography to comment on media conventions of depicting black and brown bodies. Pieces such as *Driving While Black Becomes Flying While Brown* and *After Empire* illuminate how different groups of people—primarily men, primarily those who appear black or Middle Eastern—become casualties of state governance through different forms of incarceration. Kapadia is careful not to conflate 'black' and 'brown' in the national imaginary (anti-black and anti-Arab racism are not the same) but, instead, emphasises that attention to 'historical and geographical specificities' can illuminate similarities between the 'long twentieth century' and 'the long history of invasion, settlement and military occupation that culminated in the creation of the United States' (119).

As these artists show, formal government—and its informal extensions into social life—arrives with rigid predetermined structures and discourses that limit transformation to strategies that inevitably reproduce the system. Those familiar with Audre Lorde's work may find overlap with her commonly cited provocation, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (1984: 112). *Insurgent Aesthetics* suggests that 'the master's tools' are the liberal, rights-based discourses and practices that attempt to reform the nation-state and make it more just. Artists, however, can 'offer creative strategies to unmoor the stranglehold of common explanatory frames of imperial power' (26) and imagine 'other modes of decolonial and Indigenous futurity that are not reducible to the liberal democratic state' (178).

In many ways, I am the proverbial choir for Kapadia's argument. I regularly teach a class titled Art, Activism and Social Justice and edit the online open-access journal *Films for the Feminist Classroom*. I take for granted the vital role that art plays as a cultural, affective, political, and aesthetic force. Yet, while artists continue to curate vital and invaluable 'sneak attack[s] while the giant sleeps, a sleight of hands when the giant is awake' (Anzaldúa, 1990: xxiv), the tangible impact of art remains unclear. When mostly white men still serve in political and governmental positions, when voter suppression still disenfranchises many black and brown bodies, and when Indigenous populations are still immobilised by inhumane living conditions, governments need to be held accountable. To be fair, Kapadia does not present artistic disidentification with state logics as excluding conventional political action; his analysis, though, does lead to questions like: *What is next? How do we move into realising the transformations this art suggests?*

Another question *Insurgent Aesthetics* raises bears on the controversy surrounding the 2011 Lacoste Elysée Prize, which included *Nation Estate* on the short list of finalists. Sansour was asked to withdraw from the contest because one of the prize's corporate sponsors found her piece 'too pro-Palestinian' (177). The resulting publicity and protests led the museum to end the contest and its partnership with the sponsor. Kapadia uses this event to comment on the way the state and neoliberal capitalism can shape the practice of art—as constraining and disciplining forces and as fodder for artists to critique and rework. However, other than this prize and references to places that have exhibited insurgent art, the art industry itself is a somewhat muted interlocutor in the book. Some of the featured work, such as Bilal's *Shoot an Iraqi* and Sansour's high-production-value films, require significant input of resources and funds. More generally, though, artists need resources, space, audiences, and often, buyers, so artmaking is political also in its relationship with the institutions of art education, galleries and museums, and funding opportunities. My point is not meant to suggest a limitation of Kapadia's analysis but to recognise another valence of art's potential insurgency. In so doing, this query affirms the potency of his intersectional interdisciplinary queer method: it offers a keen tool for illuminating and intervening in not only neoliberal nation-state machinations but also the art world and other sites of hegemony and violence.

[1] See also the special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism (20, no. 2 [2002]).

[2] Other minoritarian perspectives have joined this future-oriented conversation, as well (Muñoz, 2009; Ramírez, 2008).

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