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Cartographies of Transnational Desires: Bi-national Same-Sex Couples in Literature and Film

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The foreigner is a dreamer making love with absence, one exquisitely depressed.

Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves

Utopia...is a critique of the present order, and of the overarching dictate of how things are and will always be in the underlying status quo.

José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia

What does it mean to theorize transnational lives in the new millennium defined by a progressively globalizing labor economy that unevenly caters to and restricts cross-border migration and travel? In this paper, I examine the issue of transnationality from the point of view afforded by a particular perspective—a bi-national queer couple1—that often negotiates transnational mobility in a legal climate either hostile or indifferent to its needs. Whereas in bi-national opposite-sex unions each partner can become a sponsor of his or her spouse for immigration purposes, bi-national queer couples, due to the fact that the majority of nation-states in today’s world do not have provisions for immigration for same-sex unions, regularly face a sinister legal conundrum.2 In the United States, prior to the historic decision by the Supreme Court to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act, Section 3 in 2013, bi-national same-sex partnerships (and marriages) were bureaucratically illegible.3 For members of such couples, national borders turned into agonizing partitions that could not be remedied via any specific legal process of application or appeal. Due to its paradoxical position in the transnational milieu, a bi-national queer couple functions as a limit concept that brings to the surface multiple issues that define transnational lives in the new millennium, more generally. Bi-national queer love is often an example of what Ullrick Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim call “distant love”—a technology-assisted intimacy without a shared domesticity—a type of intimacy that is becoming more and more widespread as a result of the transnationalization of labor economies.4 Straddling two or more countries or even continents, these cross-border intimacies challenge the dominant logic of nation states by appearing “stateless” and “out-of-place,” impermanent and illegible.5

Taking as a point of departure three cultural texts that offer representations of a bi-national queer couple’s conundrum, I seek to bring attention to the structures and the vicissitudes of distant, cross-border love—its cartographies of separation and loss, along with its utopian dimension—in the transnational
milieu marked by a collision between the centripetal forces of globalization and the centrifugal forces of economic inequality and competing nationalisms. My selection of texts—a novel by American writer Philip Gambone, *Beijing* (2003); a film by Israeli director Michael Mayer, *Out in the Dark* (2012); and a film by Spanish director Julio Medem, *Room in Rome* (2010)—form a micro-archive of works united by a common theme and a shared set of sensibilities that I call the aesthetics of absence. All three texts seek to make visible (and legible) the bi-national same-sex couple’s statelessness, portraying a unique cartography of exclusion, disorientation, and loss, as well as describing the mechanics of coping with distance. Gambone’s novel *Beijing* was published at the dawn of U.S. same-sex marriage wars and has as its focus a relationship between an American and a Chinese man who develop a form of distant intimacy as a response to geographical distance. The two films I examine were produced during the years when global same-sex marriage debates had reached their highest point of intensity. With its focus on an Israeli-Palestinian gay male couple (*Out in the Dark*) and a Spanish-Russian lesbian couple (*Room in Rome*), these two films shift our attention away from U.S.-based marriage-equality debates onto a broader examination of lives marked by transnationality, exploring bi-national same-sex relationships as a site of convergence and collision of multiple political, cultural, and legal forces—a thick intertwining of the personal and the political realms. In all three texts, national borders intrude and encroach upon the psychic, erotic, and intimate space of the couple exposing the differentials of power and privilege, thus turning the couple into a site of a larger political and cultural tension—a locus of embodiment of global dynamisms.

All three texts feature examples of “love at a distance,” depicting relationships that require negotiating not only cultural and political difference but also geographical distance. A “distant couple”—one without a shared domesticity or a claim to longevity—does not easily lend itself to legibility and theoretical analysis. A distant couple is a specific assemblage of bodies, priorities, practices, and affects that is distinctly different from both the assemblage we refer to as desire and the assemblage we refer to as marriage or a domestic partnership. Alliances of desire are mostly temporary groupings of bodies and affects. In contrast with alliances of desire, the couple is a non-ephemeral unit: it seeks some form of endurance, which—especially when it comes to love at a distance—does not necessarily involve shared domestic life or interconnectedness in terms of finances and other practical matters. In contrast to a marriage or a family unit, such a couple is neither defined by the law nor makes itself bureaucratically legible. It is not a unit constituted through an act of legal inscription. In its non-ephemeral elusiveness, the distant couple often falls through disciplinary and categorical cracks, figuring only as a “dim” object, to use Levi Briant’s term, in the realm of cultural politics and migration analytics.

The three works examined in this paper are brought together by my own comparativist desire to see the common thread in disparate things. They are united, however, by a set of distinct features that flesh out the specific injury to the queer body as it enters into a bi-national relationship, dramatizing the profound sense of disorientation and the loss of status one experiences when falling in love with a foreigner. In all three works, distant love is also foreign love—a site of an encounter with cultural difference. To fall in love with a foreigner is to fall out of your proper place, to become a stranger to yourself and to those who share your set of cultural sensibilities. Consequently, all three texts are preoccupied with the issues of place and territory, and engage in obsessive mapping of their characters’ idiosyncratic geographies of movement, border-crossing, and entrapment.

An obsession with absence in its various aspects is one of the most prominent features of these texts’ aesthetic sensibility. In Gambone’s *Beijing*, absence figures poignantly and painfully as a literal absence of the American protagonist’s Chinese partner, left behind in Beijing; this gaping absence is subsumed and sublimated at the end of the novel as a universal human condition one is forced to accept and embrace as an opportunity for spiritual growth. In *Out in the Dark*, absence is contended with as an insurmountable loss, figuring as the unjust and unjustifiable lack of a national or a transnational place...
where the Israeli-Palestinian queer couple can be safe. The aesthetic of absence threaded through these cultural texts contains, aside from melancholy, a utopian dimension. Whereas *Beijing* and *Out in the Dark* posit national boundaries as insurmountable obstacles and expose and critique the injustice, *Room in Rome* inscribes itself as a cathartic cross-border project, a model enactment that temporarily suspends or even overcomes the logic of nation-states as regimes of control over queer bodies. In *Room in Rome*, a queer country is inaugurated into existence in a manner similar to nation states—through an orthopedic erection of a symbol (a flag) and by claiming representation on the map of the world (a Google map). This theatrical enactment of a queer utopia, with its subsequent technological mediation via Google maps therefore turns absence into a presence—a transubstantiation that affords the couple an imaginary homeland.

These three texts await scholarly attention, especially in the context of the global marriage equality debates; aside from reviews, most of which I reference in my discussion, there has not been any analysis of these works in academic literature. 

Philip Gambone’s novel *Beijing* serves as a prime example of early twenty-first-century marriage-equality literature, dramatizing a bi-national gay couple’s dilemma as well as exploring the issues of transnational mobility in the globalized labor economy. The novel’s geography bestrides two locations: Boston and Beijing, describing a trajectory of movement from a gay neighborhood in Boston to the Chinese capital and then back. The novel centers on David—an aging gay man from Boston—who applies for a one-year position at a medical clinic in Beijing, China to combat the melancholy he feels after the loss of his long-term partner to AIDS. When his application lands him a job, he packs his bags and finds himself on the twenty-hour flight to Beijing. The fact that David is an AIDS widower is significant: by establishing a link to the literature of the AIDS epidemic, the novel follows a thread from one loss (due to the disease) to another loss David is about to experience as a member of a bi-national same-sex couple.

The novel abounds in opulent descriptions of everyday life in a Chinese metropolis as seen through the eyes of a somewhat naïve American traveler: while eager to understand the foreign culture intimately, the protagonist, who has no prior knowledge of China, inevitably eroticizes and orientalizes Chinese culture, relying in his descriptions on the inescapable proximity of the erotic and the exotic. Lost in the environment he finds incomprehensible, he spends hours of his free time walking through the city streets, intoxicated by the new experiences and oversaturated with sensations. An uplifting effect of international travel is palpable in these descriptions that capture both the excitement and the culture shock experienced by the protagonist:

People were everywhere. [...] Everyone moving, crowding, pushing, swarming, staring at me.
There were old people, their features as ancient and beautiful as craggy mountains; young people with broad, trusting smiles and unthinkably slender waists; businessmen, cell phones to their ears, decked out in Chinese knockoffs of Gucci and Armani; soldiers, some not much older than boy scouts, others with looks as menacing as Mongols, guarding who-knew what in their goose-turd green uniforms; and children, children everywhere: infants, toddlers, youngsters, street urchins. Everywhere. Bicycles everywhere. Scooters everywhere. Dust and pollution everywhere. Bulldozers everywhere. Cigarette smoke everywhere. Exotic aromas, exquisite perfumes, appalling stenches. Everywhere. The publicness of everything, everywhere. Rich with repetitions and following a tempo that creates a sense of the narrator being out of breath, trying to catch up with the speed of the bustling metropolis, the description is exemplary of the narrator’s style as he simultaneously admires the bustling economy of hyperdevelopment (bulldozers connoting massive building projects), while maintaining a degree of voyeuristic distance from the capital’s exotic residents (who boast ancient, Mongolian features and “unthinkably slender waists”). Drawn to the promise of a foreign adventure, David embarks on a cartographic project becoming a dedicated mapmaker, determined to reorient and rediscover himself in this new, unfamiliar place. His habitual understanding of public and private is reconfigured—while everything seems public in China (as a white foreigner, he is often stared at), he has to be guarded and secretive about his sexuality and learn how to navigate the gay world that is entirely different from the one he is used to. Becoming a foreigner is an exhilarating experience: if back in Boston David felt aged, heavy, and rigid, in Beijing he becomes light-weighted and elastic, open-minded and hopeful again, restored and relieved from his melancholic fixation on the lost love object.

In Strangers to Ourselves—a book devoted to theorizing the figure of the foreigner, Julia Kristeva writes: “The foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.”13 Seeking to universalize the figure of the foreigner, Kristeva claims that strangeness lies in the hidden core of our intimate selves, that each one of us, ultimately, is a stranger to oneself. By traveling to another country and having to contend with cultural difference, one becomes more attuned to this inner strangeness: a part of us gets unhinged, set in motion by leaving familiar grounds. Due to this unhinging, which can be experienced as liberation, a foreigner exits his or her usual orbit and, like an astronaut, enters a “weightless state.”14 Gambone’s protagonist indeed becomes weightless, his ties to his home country receding. Having managed to locate and gain entrance into a shifting, ephemeral, perpetually transient gay community in China’s capital city,15 David himself enters a state of ethereal lightness and pleasurable transience, a migratory existence offering a solution to his melancholy.

By drawing attention to the excitement of foreign travel, the novel brings into focus the upbeat side of the globalization of labor economies as perceived from the point of view of a middle-class American citizen. Naïve and unaware of his privilege within the globalized labor market, David experiences his year in China as a personal emancipation. As a member of a transnational managerial class—he manages an American medical facility in Beijing—David has privileged access to sites of international gay male tourism, the hidden yet vibrant underworld of international gay bars, as well as public parks and public baths frequented by both foreign men and locals. While in Boston David felt aged, undesirable, and, ultimately, invisible in the neighborhood populated by hordes of younger and better-looking men, in Beijing his foreignness, as well as his ability to pay for meals and drinks, affords him considerable visibility and power.

Paradoxically, Kristeva contends, when a foreigner falls in love, he or she loses the state of weightlessness. “As soon as foreigners take action or passion,” she writes, “they take root.”16 When Gambone’s protagonist becomes enamored with a young Chinese artist Bosheng, he finds himself wishing to take
root, eager to make a home with the new lover by taking him to Boston—a project that proves to be impossible. By contrast, Bosheng—a struggling young artist who is aware of his lack of privilege in the transnational milieu—is realistic and resigned to the fact that his lover will eventually leave him behind. He says: “In Boston, maybe, you can find some other boyfriends, I think.” For David, falling in love with a foreigner becomes a learning experience that teaches him a lesson about privilege and power in the global domain. While his American citizenship and middle-class status afford him significant advantages in a transnational labor economy, his homosexuality places him at a disadvantage. When considered transnationally, David is still a second-class global subject who is unable to sponsor his lover for immigration to the U.S. (or be sponsored by his lover for immigration to China). In the absence of international or national laws regarding same-sex couples in either China or the United States, David and his lover have to separate when David’s yearlong contract comes to an end. There is no clear path for the future, no plan, except for David’s promise to come back for Christmas and the mutual promise to write letters. Later, an immigration lawyer David hires explains that it would be very unlikely Bosheng would be ever allowed to visit David in the U.S. or get a student visa: a young unattached Chinese man, he is considered an overstay risk (a euphemism for becoming an illegal immigrant). Bosheng’s chances of getting a student visa are one in ten, the lawyer explains. David’s transnational trajectory of travel and return thus reveals a differential economy of power and privilege—between Chinese and American citizens, between opposite- and same-sex couples.

The novel ends with two letters—a letter written in the language of bureaucracy (a lawyer’s letter notifying David of the near impossibility of his unification with his lover) and a love letter from Bosheng. Upon reading both letters, David experiences a personal epiphany—an ecstatic experience in which he comes to terms with the loss of the future while simultaneously realizing that their love can persist in the absence of a shared future in the same location. He conjures a vision of their love as a distant love—a transnational relationship without shared domesticity or the promise of permanence:

Why all the frenzy about tallying up? Why all the preoccupation with what things came to? What if there were no “in the end”? And what if you could decide to live your life that way—without “in the end” in mind? [...] The tears were streaming down my cheeks now, profuse and unstoppable, for the surprise of it was that because I didn’t need Bo[sheng] anymore I was now free to love him even more. To love him without the treacherous question—but what happens in the end?—hissing in my ear. Of course I missed him: there by my side, sharing my bed, wrapping his delicious body tight around mine as he had that first night under his musty quilts. But here I was now, and now presented a different opportunity to love him, an opportunity from afar, not a better opportunity, not a worse opportunity, [...] just a different one. [...] Bo[sheng] and I were not lovers in abeyance, not lovers-to-be. We were lovers. Today and today and today. And our only job was to find each other, however we could, in each and whatever today we had.18

In the absence of a place to call its own, love—an enduring emotion—becomes reconceptualized as love at a distance—an transient alliance that lasts while it lasts, “today, today, and today.” The narrator’s grief is disavowed through a rhetorical gesture by which he appears to accept the absence of his lover, understanding it as a different way to love, but contrasted with his tears and the lawyer’s letter, it leaves the reader knowing that because there is no “solution” David must find a way to reconcile himself to the law. While positioning itself as a didactic project that educates its audience about the injustice faced by the characters, the text simultaneously seeks to universalize transience and loss as the essence of human experience par excellence and invites the reader to join in.
Love Amidst the Clash of Nationalisms: West Bank—Tel Aviv

As Gambone’s novel shows, thinking about sexuality transnationally means examining how individuals and couples are multiply marginalized, not only in terms of their sexuality, but also their nationhood and citizenship, the global South and the global North. It also demonstrates that bi-national same-sex couples can be caught in a precarious “in-between”: in-between nation states, without a legal status, without an identity, and in a state of permanent impermanence. Political philosopher Giorgio Agamben observes that in our times the logic of the nation-state is no longer an adequate framework for understanding the political realities of mass displacement, which forces us to contend with the issue of statelessness as a global condition, particularly as it is embodied in the figure of a refugee. He writes: “Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, it deserves to be regarded as the central figure of our political history.”

The peculiar extraterritoriality of the bi-national same-sex couple is similar to the position of a refugee—a “limit concept,” according to Agamben—insofar as it represents a troubling element in the order of the state, territory, and nation.

In a dramatic film that a reviewer calls “Brokeback Mountain’s worthy successor,” Israeli director Michael Mayer examines the paradoxical space of the bi-national same-sex couple where the less privileged member of the couple, in fact, becomes a refugee—a stateless subject—thus bringing into focus the proximity between the statelessness of the refugee and the extraterritoriality of the bi-national same-sex couple. Set in contemporary Israel and Palestine, Out in the Dark (2012) describes the trajectories of two young gay men—a Palestinian Arab and an Israeli Jew—who, after falling in love with each other, experience a catastrophic loss of status in their respective communities ending up effectively out of place both as a couple and as individuals. Initially, the viewer might expect to see in the image of Palestinian-Israeli love a promise of hope for the two troubled nation-states, an allegory of peaceful, and even loving, coexistence. Contrary to such expectations, the film exposes a landscape of violence defined by the clash of two militant nationalisms—Israeli and Palestinian—and has its two central characters cornered, separated, and moving in opposite directions.

The film opens with a sequence where Nimr Mashrawi, a native of a Palestinian village, slips through the gap in the chain link fence—the permeable barrier that divides Israel from the West Bank—to visit a gay nightclub in Tel Aviv; the existence of the nightclub contrasts a restrictive Palestine to a seemingly more liberal Israel. This becomes the fateful night when Nimr meets Roy Schaefer, a young Israeli who is unaware of the difficulties Nimr has to negotiate to get to the safety of the gay club. Nimr and Roy have instant chemistry, but Nimr has to catch a ride back to the village before long. The film’s geography thus straddles two dramatically different locations: the fast-paced, noisy, individualistic Tel Aviv—a city of concrete and glass—and a quiet, traditional, patriarchal Palestinian village with narrow streets and old multifamily houses built of limestone. The former is the world of Roy—a privileged, young Israeli lawyer who works for his father’s prominent firm. He has a slick car, a modern apartment, and he is out to his open-minded and supportive parents who live in suburban Tel Aviv. Roy’s world seems inherently Western in its liberalism, consumerism, and an endless list of privileges taken for granted. Nimr’s environment is very different; in the course of the film, he continuously moves between two places: the village with its strong family ties and anti-Israel militancy and Tel-Aviv, whose queer residents’ cosmopolitan, liberal attitude makes Nimr, for the time being, feel accepted. A psychology student, a pacifist, and an intellectual, Nimr tries to follow transnational knowledge economy’s formula for success: having signed up for a graduate psychology class in Tel Aviv with an aim to get accepted into a doctorate program in Princeton, he says, “Failure is not an option.” Considering himself to be a member of the global educated class, he envisions his life as a journey of a transnational knowledge worker: a famed professor or an expert clinician with Ivy League credentials. His actual journey, predicated on his location and identity as a young
Palestinian gay man, is very different indeed, as the director masterfully demonstrates.

In the context of the debates over the politics of pinkwashing and homonationalism in contemporary Israeli queer cinema (especially state-funded films, such as *Out in the Dark*), scholars are bound to be suspicious of representational politics that center on exposing Palestine as a “premodern” space where queer lives seem unlivable, while situating Israel as a site of liberalism and progress because of its acceptance of sexual diversity.\(^{23}\) Jancovic, in her analysis of *The Bubble*—a 2006 Israeli film that can be considered *Out in the Dark*’s precursor in that it also features an Israeli-Palestinian gay couple—is critical of the film’s narrative of queer progress in Israel, capturing its formula via the term “thin critique.” A thin critique is a representational logic that, while appearing to expose the violence of the Israeli occupation, does the subtle work of legitimizing it though a cooptation of the issue of gay rights (and primarily, by reinforcing the view of Palestine as a site of queer suffering). In a footnote, she offers a similar reading of *Out in the Dark*: “[T]he 2012 feature by U.S. based Israeli film-maker Michael Mayer, *Out in the Dark* (which received Israeli state funding and contains several plot similarities to *The Bubble*), reinforces the logic of exposure undergirding the ‘untold story’ mode of Israeli stories about closeted queer Palestinians seeking better—always Israeli, European, and/or US—cultural milieus for expression of their sexual identity and full personhood.”\(^{24}\)

While I am generally sympathetic to Jancovic’s reading of Israeli queer cinema through the framework of pinkwashing,\(^{25}\) I believe this kind of a critique too often relies on a vision of an “authentic” Palestinian queer identity that is somehow free of any preexisting Israeli/European/U.S. influence.\(^{26}\) This vision, paradoxically, promotes the view of Palestine as lacking an “outside”—despite the profoundly transnational, diasporic character of the contemporary Palestinian community. I contend that *Out in the Dark* shows, rather effectively, that both characters’ identities already have a deep transnational dimension that is inseparable from their localized/ethnic identities. Thus, Nimr’s vision of himself as a transnational knowledge worker is a part of his identity as a modern Palestinian gay man, and the tension between the local and the global forms of belonging is central to his identity. Maintaining that representing his transnational aspirations in the film amounts to pinkwashing is a simplification, in my view. Moreover, the film portrays both Israel and Palestine as sites that are crossed by multiple transnational legal and shadow economies—such as the smuggling of goods and people across the Mediterranean Sea—making visible the network of shadow routes and providers that is used by Nimr at the end of the film. It is also important to note that *Out in the Dark* diverges from its predecessor—*The Bubble*—in that it does not situate Israel as a hospitable home for gay rights. Instead, homophobic injustice is exposed on both sides of the border; while in the Palestinian village it is presented as overt, on the Israeli side it takes a more covert, though equally sinister, form.

The title of the film—*Out in the Dark*—signals that the characters of the film develop a paradoxical relationship to the space they occupy. It indicates a trajectory of displacement: a path that is treacherous because of poor visibility, a dislodgment without a precise goal, the loss of coordinates, and the failure of one’s capacity for proper geographical positioning. To be “out” means both to have become visible but also to have become evicted from the place of safety that we associate with “inside”—a place that shelters and protects. The characters indeed are presented with a conundrum that takes them into an unchartered territory and sets them in motion, violently dislodging them from their original locations. The symbolism of darkness is poignant as well: the majority of the scenes in the film indeed happen in the dark, in the afterhours. It is in the night that the lovers meet for the first time, and it is in the night that they are separated. The darkness creates a sense of claustrophobia, where space becomes progressively more and more limited, and the walls close in on the characters as they face political forces much larger than themselves. Both locations of the film—the West Bank and Tel Aviv—become increasingly more and more inhospitable, punitive, and, ultimately, carceral spaces.
The film is set against the background of two clashing militant nationalisms—the tight network of Israeli security and a web of Palestinian resistance—that work in tandem to disallow the characters’ relationship. The film explodes into a fast-paced thriller when Nimr is confronted by Israeli secret service officers at a café in Tel Aviv. Attempting to blackmail him into becoming an informant spying on his fellow students at Birzeit University, these authority figures revoke his study permit when he refuses. Shortly after, Nimr is outed to his family, and his brother, instead of performing a ritualistic honor killing, lets him escape through the fence warning him to never come back. Evicted from his home in Palestine and an illegal in Israel, Nimr flees to his lover’s apartment, with the omniscient Israeli security searching for him.

What transpires here is the fact that the lovers’ relationship is predicated upon the fickle and conditional “benevolence” of the state of Israel—an entity that has the power to grant or revoke Nimr’s study permit without notice. The film resists the vastly criticized pinkwashing of Israel by showing that behind the façade of benevolent liberalism there lurks a landscape of unmitigated racism and state-sponsored violence. Ultimately, Palestinian queers are not safe or welcome in Israel; vulnerable prey to Israeli security forces, they are easily blackmailed and used as spies against their own people, only to be discarded and deported to Palestine (where they are viewed as collaborators) when no longer useful. Similarly, Roy’s seemingly liberal parents, accepting of his gay identity, are unapologetic in their racism towards his Palestinian partner. The absence of a national or a third, transnational space that would accommodate the Israeli-Palestinian same-sex couple becomes poignant and palpable at the point in the film when Nimr becomes stateless, ejected from both places he previously managed to navigate.

Central to the film’s plot is a dramatization of the violence of the law as it bars the lovers from being together through its enforcement of the logic of division between nation-states. Both characters initially trust that the law will assist them, if they play by the book. Nimr believes in the benevolence of the law (and the state of Israel) when he applies for and receives the student permit. He believes in the benevolence of the transnational knowledge economy that will recognize his talent and will transport him to one of the centers of higher learning in the West. Roy’s approach is to seek legal guidance as well: when Nimr’s permit is revoked, Roy, who is himself a lawyer, arranges a meeting with an immigration specialist to tackle the couple’s problem. He is flabbergasted when he learns that Nimr has no options that would allow him to stay in Israel legally, despite the fact that he faces a threat to his life in Palestine, and that Roy has no legal means to sponsor his Palestinian partner’s travel permit, a visa, or any other document. In the course of the film, the lovers have to unlearn their initial investment in doing things by the book: Roy has to break the law to save the life of his lover by seeking assistance from the mob who agree to smuggle Nimr out of the country on a yacht.

Out in the Dark dramatizes the intersectionality of oppression, by showing how Nimr’s low status as a Palestinian—an identity marked by vulnerability—overlaps with, and is amplified by the state-sponsored lack of full recognition of gay rights—in both Palestine and Israel. As of 2016, same-sex marriages cannot be performed in Israel; however, the State of Israel has some provisions for same-sex couples: for instance, same-sex couples residing in Israel can receive benefits as common-law partners, provided that they can prove joint resident status and financial interdependence. These benefits do not amount to marriage, however, and partners’ official status remains “single.” Additionally, Israel allows for a limited recognition of a same-sex marriage conducted abroad. Even so, for partners married abroad and needing immigration provisions, the existing law becomes a legalistic quagmire if one of the partners is not Jewish and thus is not eligible to receive Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return. For instance, Haaretz reports that Bayardo Alvarez, an American (non-Jewish) partner of Joshua Goldberg (an Israeli citizen), has been held in a troublesome legal limbo being refused immigration rights: “Alvarez was granted temporary residence after the couple had been summoned six times to the Interior Ministry branch in Eilat,
where they say they were treated in a hostile, humiliating way by the clerk. Goldberg claims it was clear they were looking for excuses not to grant him residence.” In 2008, Reuters reported that a temporary residence permit was finally issued to a Palestinian gay man who had been asking for permission to live with his partner in Israel for five years and claimed that his life was in danger. These examples make obvious that the injustice endured by bi-national queer couples is intersectional in its nature, creating conditions of statelessness for such couples even in the cases of nation-states that are lauded for their progressive laws.

The lives of the characters in the film are transnational lives: they are the site of a thick intertwining of local, national, and transnational processes and are marked by intersecting relations of power and powerlessness. As such, global processes that promote international travel for the purpose of tourism, study, and work shape the characters’ transnational desires while the clash of nationalisms interrupts these desires. Early in the film, Nimr asks Roy to elope and leave Israel for a “better” location (presumably, the United States where he hopes to go to graduate school), therefore giving consideration to a possibility of forging a “third space”  for the bi-national couple in the transnational milieu. The U.S. thus figures briefly as “the final and hospitable home for cultural rights,” as Gayatri Spivak would put it, only to vanish from view as Nimr loses his legal status in Israel. This “third space” is then reconfigured, in a much less promising way, as Europe—a precarious “home” of illegal refugees from the Middle East—the last resort for Nimr as he escapes Israel illegally in a smuggler’s boat. Nimr and Roy are separated at the end of the film, with the final scenes showing Roy in a cell at the police station, interrogated by the Israeli security officer and Nimr meeting dawn in a yacht in the open sea. The lives of the lovers are wrecked: Nimr’s future journey as an illegal immigrant in Europe looks grim. Falling in love with a foreigner resulted in a catastrophic loss of home, the loss of the future he had envisioned, and also the loss of his lover. For Roy, becoming a member of a bi-national couple means an equally catastrophic loss of status, privilege, and freedom.

The film ends with dawn breaking, depicting two new spaces that emerge in the aftermath of the story. In the two final scenes the characters face away from one another (figure 1). In the frame that shows Roy at the police station, he looks to the left and down. His new trajectory is inward; his new space is carceral, punitive, and restricted—the security officer promises that he will “bury” Roy for having helped to secure Nimr’s freedom. The security officer’s homophobia once again challenges the myth of liberal Israel, bringing into view the hidden landscape of state-sponsored violence. The scene at the police station is juxtaposed with the very last scene that features Nimr on a yacht facing the dawn in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. His face is turned right and up, signaling movement in the opposite direction from Roy. No longer in the dark, he is now out in the uncharted waters as a stateless subject—without a defined identity, without a passport, an unwanted illegal heading toward an unspecified European country. The film thus follows a melancholy arc similar to the one of Gambone’s novel serving as a commentary of the bi-national queer couple’s vulnerability in the transnational domain. Yet, in contrast to Gambone’s text, it offers no psychological or spiritual resolution.

A Third Space as an Allegory: Room in Rome

The statelessness of the bi-national same-sex couple is explored in a different way—allegorically—in a 2010 film by Spanish director Julio Medem Room in Rome—a film that conjures a paradoxical vision of utopia: a queer country extraterritorial to existing nation-states. The film takes place in the lush Italian capital and tells a story of a one-night stand between a Spanish woman called Alba and a Russian woman, Natasha—a sexual escapade that turns into a wish for a relationship, resulting in a utopian enactment. The film was reviewed favorably by critics. Ponto, for instance, contends that the film is
“honest and respectful in that it doesn’t reduce the situation into male fantasy, despite a male auteur behind it.” In turn, Riendeau, a writer for *AfterEllen*—a lesbian popculture website—warmly describes it as “a sexy, messy attempt at an erotic drama.” Rich in symbolism, the film produces a visual and affective vocabulary that allegorizes the absence of transnational space that can accommodate a bi-national same-sex couple by producing—and exploring—a “third space” (a hotel room in Rome) that becomes a site of
queer utopian enactment. Thirdspace—a term coined by Soja—is a real site that acquires, paradoxically, an imaginary dimension; similar to Foucault’s heterotopia, it serves as a counter-space that subverts and redefines established topographies of desire, normativity, and power. The film stages such an expansion of a real place into an imagined utopian infinity though a temporal dilation and an imaginative opening of a new possibility of coexistence in this shared space. The room literally becomes a missing “third”—a space where normative relations between nation-states are subverted, and a new “country,” under the auspices of the erected white flag, is imaginatively forged—a utopia of transnational queer space, extra-territorial to existing nation-states.

The entire film unfolds in this third space—a transient, ephemeral, rented location, which serves well to foreground the precariousness of the romance the viewer witnesses. The room functions as a poignant visual allegory for relationships that are ephemeral, passing, and condemned to disappearance because they are out of place. Over the course of two hours the spectator witnesses the transformation of a lavishly decorated hotel room in the center of Rome (a rented place, an appropriate place for a one-night stand) from a space of desire (ephemeral) to a space of the couple (a paradoxical counter-site) that serves as a model and as an allegory of transnational queer space.

The story unravels over the course of one night—the shortest night of the year, the beginning of summer. The film’s sequences unfold in an oneiric temporality, where time seems to stretch out almost indefinitely. Central to the film’s imagery is the interplay of presence and absence: visually rich scenes are contrasted with the scenes that have absence and lack as their focus. The rich visuality of naked bodies, lovemaking, lush drapery, and voluptuous Renaissance paintings on walls are contrasted with moments of silence, pauses, hesitation—all emphasized by long takes that seem relatively devoid of visual content. The most visible and mysterious symbol of absence in the film is the absence of a flag on the central pole out at the balcony. The film is obsessed with this particular absence. “My room is called Two Flags,” Alba (the Spanish protagonist) says when she lures the Russian woman into her room. There is a European Union flag on one pole and a Rome city flag on the other pole. She points out that the third, central pole that crowns the hotel balcony is empty, it has no flag on it (figure 2). The naked pole at times functions as a visual boundary between the lovers—they are positioned strategically on opposite sides of the pole (figure 2). It is also phallic, upright—the lovers look up to the pole. This absence is juxtaposed with the richness of the interior space of the room where all the walls and the ceiling are richly decorated with textures, frescos, and paintings. Positioned outside, the pole is depicted as a visual boundary be-
Figure 3.
tween the lovers only when they come out of the privacy of their room into the open, public space of the balcony. This open space is coded as representational space (to borrow a term from Henri Lefebvre)—a space that is defined by publicly recognizable symbols of collective identity: the city of Rome and the European community.

The absence of a collectively recognized symbol on the central pole seems mysterious: framed by the flag of the city (local) and the flag on the European Union (a transnational entity), the middle pole seems to be a logical place for a national flag (Italy). The film foregrounds this absence as significant, glaring, until it is finally filled. In the last quarter of the film, the lovers raise a white bed sheet on the pole (figure 3). This gesture, which occurs at the end of the night, is orthopedic in the Lacanian sense: it is designed to create a representation of an entity that does not yet exist. It inaugurates a transnational queer country, transforming the protagonists from two individuals engaged in a one-night-stand into a couple in love that seeks endurance, representation, and public recognition.

Once the flag is erected, the film’s mood changes dramatically, which is communicated through the changes in color, lighting, images, and symbols the film employs. Night turns into the day—dark, subdued colors recede and white becomes dominant. The lovers see each other, for the first time, in the
daylight. Horizontality prevalent throughout the first half of the film turns into upright, vertical orientation. Sexual desire (represented by the bed and the bodies located horizontally) gets reoriented as desire for a shared domesticity, such as waking up together, brushing teeth together, taking a shower. The space of desire is transformed into a domestic, familial space, the space of the couple that is mediated via a symbolic representation in the public domain—the flag. As the lovers have breakfast together on the balcony, in the shadow of the new flag, they are visible from the street; their shared domesticity is also witnessed by the Italian hotel room attendant who serves them breakfast. The couple’s status as such is mediated via the work of symbolization and witnessing, indicating the necessity of such mediation. The imagined shared life is then also enacted theatrically: the couple confess their love for one another, articulate their desire for endurance, and simulate a marriage ceremony in white bathrobes (the orientation in this scene is also vertical, upright). The vertical dimension, symbolized by the flag as well as via public witnesses, can be read as an allegorical representation of the law (and its orthopedic, constitutive effects) that is needed to inaugurate the bi-national queer couple into existence via the work of legal recognition and symbolic affirmation.

The color palette in the last section of the film emphasizes radiance—of the daylight, of the marital robes, and of the flag itself. All these elements are symbolic of absence turned into presence, private desire turned into public visibility and symbolic recognition, the ephemeral turned into the enduring. The night was short (the shortest night of the year) but the day is long and here to stay. This endurance is, of course, an impossibility and is achieved only as a symbolic act—an imitation that is an expression of a desire and a demand—a utopian enactment. The film ends with the women parting and the camera assuming a bird’s-eye view. The new white flag is photoshopped into the Google map that shows the hotel in Rome from above. The flag performs the function of a monument—to commemorate, to give endurance to the event—and a performative function: to inaugurate a country that does not exist, a queer country that is extraterritorial to existing nation states (figure 4).19

Beijing, Out in the Dark, and Room in Rome conjure modes of articulating the quandary of the bi-national same-sex couple and make the absence of transnational queer space, as it pertains to such couples, visible. The texts share a number of similarities, including their preoccupation with geography and mapping, their focus on the couple rather than on the individual, and their exploration of the meaning of legal and symbolic representation on the psychic life of a couple. In their examination of the bi-national same-sex couple as an embodiment of multiple, often conflicting global forces, Beijing and Out in the Dark offer a critique of the logic of the nation-state that affects the patterns of queer subjects’ transnational mobility—in terms of travel, migration, and immigration. At the same time, Beijing invites the reader to embrace the border as a productive psychical space where physical absence is sublimated into a transcendent presence, and where the specific injury endured by a queer couple is universalized as a universal human condition. In Out in the Dark, transnational queer space (or rather its absence) emerges as a deadlock where the national border appears insoluble and the partition irremediable. In turn, Room in Rome can be viewed as an allegoric representation of displacement, creating a set of symbolizations and substitutions to remedy the actual limits that the couple face. The aesthetic of absence in Room in Rome contains a utopian dimension where a queer country is inaugurated into existence in a manner similar to nation states—through an orthopedic erection of a symbol and by claiming representation on the map of the world. Room in Rome thus positions itself as a cathartic cross-border project, a model enactment that temporarily suspends or even overcomes the logic of nation-states as regimes of control over queer bodies. All three works are important contributions to the contemporary queer archive as they make visible the injustice sustained by a queer couple in the transnational domain. More generally, they offer a contribution to the growing archive of the today’s “stateless” subjects—the inconceivable and unmappable “non-citizens” of the world comprised of nation-states.
Notes

1. A bi-national couple is a union where partners are citizens of two different countries and do not share a nationality. In this text, I often use the term “queer” and “same-sex” interchangeably. The three narratives I discuss feature same-sex couples. It is important to emphasize, however, that other non-heterosexual partnerships (such as couples where one or both partners are transgender) face the same or similar legal difficulties in the transnational domain.

2. As of today, the following countries have provisions for bi-national queer couples for immigration purposes: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Ecuador, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay.

3. The issue of bi-national same-sex couples’ plight crossed into mainstream visibility in the months leading to and immediately following DOMA’s repeal. See, for instance, Maria Sachetti, “US will consider same-sex partnerships in deportations” in Boston Globe (28 Sep. 2012); Margaret Hartmann “The U.S. Has Approved Its First Green Card for a Gay Spouse” in NY Mag (June 2013); and Blake Ellis “DOMA ruling’s overlooked benefit: Immigration rights” in Money CNN (22 Aug. 2013). Several websites were launched to support bi-national same-sex couples and families, including The DOMA Project that existed since 2011 (DOMAProject.org). See also Love Stories: Binational Couples on the Front Lines Against DOMA—a film directed by Brynn Gelbard (2012).


5. While immigration laws in the U.S. changed in 2013 to accommodate individuals in same-sex partnerships, the status of marriage equality around the world leaves much to be desired. New “gay propaganda” laws in Russia, the tightening of anti-gay laws on the African continent and India, and the ongoing struggle for LGBT rights in Iran signal changes that further solidify obstacles to global mobility for individuals in same-sex couples.

6. With its focus on same-sex couples caught in a transnational legal limbo, Judy Rickard’s Torn Apart: United by Love, Divided by Law (Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Press, 2011) offers a unique and valuable contribution to the field. See also testimonies collected on LoveExiles.org—a site that was launched in 2004 and DomaProject.org (in existence since 2011).

7. A phrase coined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim in Distant Love.


9. Although the issues of transnational queer space received considerable scholarly attention in recent years, it has been discussed in two ways: either as a space traversed by circuits of global mobility and desire, as trajectories of (primarily gay male) tourism navigating the globe in search of cruising spots and gay meccas, or as paths of migration trodden by asylum seekers and individual LGBT migrants, looking for relief from the pain and suffering inflicted on them by their own nation-states. See, for instance, Gabriel Giorgi, “Madrid En Tránsito: Travelers, Visibility, and Gay Identity,” GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 8, no 1-2 (2002): 57-79; Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan, Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism (New York: NYU Press, 2002); Eithne Luibheid and Lionel Cantu Jr., Queer Migrations: Sexuality, U.S. Citizenship, and Border-Crossings (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Jasbir Puar “Circuits of Queer Mobility Tourism, Travel, and Globalization”

10. This absence of academic criticism is attributable to the fact that all three texts are still very new: *Out in the Dark*, for instance, entered the international film festival circuit as recently as 2013 and is bound to receive scholarly attention in light of academic discussions surrounding gay rights and Israeli politics of self-representation. *Beijing* (published in 2003) awaits scholarly attention as part of the history of marriage equality literature and as an example of gay travel writing (see, for instance, Raphael Kadushin who invokes Gambone in his “Can Gay Men Save Travel Writing?” in *Gay and Lesbian Review* (July 1, 2010).


15. In his non-fiction essay “Gay Life and Gay Hope in Beijing,” Gambone reports that, prior to his semester in China, he tried to find out what gay life was like in Beijing, but could not find any information. “[A] gay graduate student who had recently come to the U.S. from Beijing summarily told me: ‘There is no gay culture and almost no gay life. Gays are invisible.’” (*The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 4.2, April 30, 1997, 14). Upon traveling to Beijing, he found that “the sub-culture that, while definitely still underground, was more vibrant than [he’d been led to expect]” (15).


17. Ibid., 267.

18. Ibid., 311.


20. Ibid., 23.


22. The film received a mixture of favorable reviews (see, for instance, reviews by Breen, Hoden, and Combs), and critical responses (see, for instance, responses by Bailey, Forest, and Cottey), generating controversy around the issue of coopting gay rights in Israeli cinema (see my discussion of the “pinkwashing” argument below).


24. Coleen Jancovic, “‘You Can’t Film Here’: Queer Political Fantasy and Thin Critique of Israeli
Occupation in *The Bubble*, *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2013), 118.


26. For a critique of the notion of Palestinian queer identities as unlivable, see AlQaws’ (a Palestinian organization that promotes sexual and gender diversity) statement online. AlQaws states: “Understanding ‘homophobia’ in colonial contexts demands accounting for colonialism in order to understand homophobia, rather than positing homophobia as a timeless universal of all societies or the specific property of Arab and/or Muslim societies.” AlQaws.org.

27. Jancovic points out the proximity of gay and collaborator identities in the contemporary Palestinian imaginary, since many Palestinian gay men were targeted by Israeli secret services and blackmailed into collaborating. See “‘You Can’t Film Here’: Queer Political Fantasy and Thin Critique of Israeli Occupation in *The Bubble*,” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 97-118. This particular colonial situation thus exacerbates Nimr’s predicament, where he is subjected to the threat of extreme violence reserved for (gay) collaborators on the Palestinian side, and to the suspicion reserved for potential terrorists on the Israeli side.

28. For a critique of *Out in the Dark* as pinkwashing, see Brady Forrest, “The Pinkwashing of *Out in the Dark*,” Mondoweiss (Sept 24, 2014).


31. “Thirdspace” is a term introduced by Edward Soja. Combining the qualities of both real and imaginary spaces, the term shares many features with Foucault’s heterotopia or Muñoz’s “concrete utopias.” I will revisit the term in the last section of the essay, explaining how it figures as a utopian enactment of a transnational queer space in *Room in Rome*.


34. See Danielle Riendeau, “Review of ‘Room in Rome,’” in *AfterEllen* (December 27, 2010).


36. Heterotopias are “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found in the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” 24).


39. Generally speaking, critics failed to recognize the underlying allegorical structure of the film with its focus of spatiality and mapping. Holland, for instance, writes: “The women show each
other photos of their houses, via computer; Medem seems fascinated by our techno-based ability to condense space and time, and the intimacies of this single hotel room are repeatedly contrasted with the vastness of the earth or even of space.” Yet, he does not know how to interpret this fascination. Similarly, Riendeau points to the film’s obsession with mapping, interpreting it as “a none-too-subtle commentary on intimacy versus technology and the vastness of our world—brought up multiple times by Alba’s amazing Earth-sized magical internet map.”

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