The advertisement opens with the tantalizing twangs of exotic music, setting the scene for a double date; two cisgender men and two cisgender women face each other at an intimate dinner table. While three of the party members might potentially be read as white, one is definitely not. A black woman is notably distinct from her companions, the rest of whom, despite having somewhat varied features, pass as familiar bodies of the Levantine region. As the languorous tune unfolds, the black woman slips off one of her shoes with her other foot and boldly reaches her toes out to the feet of the pretty woman sitting across from her, who promptly lurches, spilling her glass of wine on herself. The bearded man sitting next to her gives her a confused look, until he feels the advance of toes on his crotch from underneath the table. After catching a quick wink from his counterpart, he bursts into the laughter of recognition: all are welcome here. As the laughter infects the scene, the video, directed to Canadians specifically and North Americans and Europeans more generally, in bold caption announces, “In Israel, Love Has No Boundaries.” This shameless conviction,
blatantly challenging all conventional understanding of the territorial apparatus of the occupation and its perfection of the proliferation and instrumentalization of boundaries, is then followed by the written phrases “Tel Aviv Is the Host to One of the World’s Largest Gay Pride Parades” and, shortly after, “Israel, Small Country, Big Pride.”

This piece of advertising, created by the pro-Israel organization Size Doesn’t Matter as part of an ad campaign focused on promoting the virtues of Israel to Canadians, can be hailed as an example of “pinkwashing,” a piece of propaganda highlighting the LGBT rights record of Israel as a function of obscuring or legitimating its occupation of Palestine. Repurposed in 2009 from campaigns to critique facile medical corporate support of breast cancer research, pinkwashing has been redefined as the Israeli state’s use of its admittedly stellar LGBT rights record to deflect attention from, and in some instances to justify or legitimate, its occupation of Palestine. Resonating within a receptive field of globalized Islamophobia significantly amplified since September 11, 2001, this messaging is reliant on a civilizational narrative about the modernity of the Israelis juxtaposed against the backward homophobia of the Palestinians. As such, pinkwashing has become a commonly used tag for the cynical promotion of LGBT bodies as representative of Israeli democracy. More generally, it is the erasure of hierarchies of power through the favoring of the “gay-friendly nation” imagery. It is a discourse about civilizational superiority that relies on a transparent and uninterrogated construction of “Palestinian homophobia” contingent upon the foreclosure of any questioning about “Israeli homophobia.” Besides making Zionism more appealing to (Euro-American) gays, part of the mechanism at work that benefits Israel is a disciplining of Palestinian queers into legible subjects. At the same time, as Haneen Maikey has noted, the most relevant and damning effect of pinkwashing is its contribution to the processes of internal colonization: the naturalization of Israeli superiority by Palestinians themselves. The most important targets of pinkwashing therefore are not actually Euro-American gay tourists but (queer and gay) Palestinians themselves. As such, I would argue that it functions dually, as a form of discursive preemptive securitization that marshals neo-orientalist fears of Palestinians as backward, sexually repressed terrorists, and as an intense mode of subjugation of Palestinians under settler colonial rule.

For whom is pinkwashing legible and persuasive as a political discourse, and why? First of all, a neoliberal accommodationist economic structure
engenders the niche marketing of various ethnic and minoritized groups and has normalized the production of a gay and lesbian tourism industry built on the discursive distinction between gay-friendly and not-gay-friendly destinations.4 The claims of pinkwashing are often seen as plausible when rendered through an LGBT rights discourse that resonates within North America and Europe as a dominant measurement of teleological progress.5 These claims make far less sense in the “Middle East,” for example, where there is a healthy skepticism about the universalizing of LGBT rights discourses and where knowledge of the complexities of sexualities in the region is far more nuanced. Additionally, in some senses Israel is a pioneer of homonationalism, as its particular position at the crosshairs of settler colonialism, occupation, and neoliberalist accommodationism creates the perfect storm for the normalization of homosexuality through national belonging. The homonationalist history of Israel illuminates a burgeoning of LGBT rights and increased mobility for gays and lesbians during the concomitant increased segregation and decreased mobility of Palestinian populations, especially post-Oslo. I have detailed this point at greater length elsewhere, but to quickly summarize: the advent of gay rights in Israel begins around the same time as the first intifada, with the 1990s known as Israel’s “gay decade” brought on by the legalization of homosexuality in the Israeli Defense Forces, workplace antidiscrimination provisions, and numerous other legislative changes.6 The IDF becomes a notable site of homonationalist distinction in relation to other countries in the “Middle East,” as “Only in Israel” can “Gay Officers Serve Their Country.”

The financial, military, affective, and ideological entwinement of U.S. and Israeli settler colonialisms, and the role of the United States more generally, should also not be minimized when evaluating why pinkwashing appears to be an effective discursive strategy.7 The United States and Israel are the greatest beneficiaries of homonationalism in the current global geopolitical order, as homonationalism operates to manage difference on the scalar registers of the internal, territorial, and global. Moreover, pinkwashing is an ideological and economic solicitation directed to the United States—Israel’s greatest financial supporter internationally—and to Euro-American gays who have the political capital and financial resources to invest in Israel. Thus, pinkwashing’s unconscious appeal to U.S. gays is produced through the erasure of U.S. settler colonialism enacted in the tacit endorsement of Israel’s occupation of Palestine.8
But pinkwashing has many antecedents; it is one more justification of colonial rule in the long history of imperial, racial, and national violence. How has “the homosexual question” come to supplement “the woman question” of the colonial era to modulate arbitration between modernity and tradition, citizen and terrorist, homonational and queer? As elaborated by Partha Chatterjee, this question arose with some force in the decolonization movements in South Asia, whereby the capacity for an emerging postcolonial government to protect native women from oppressive patriarchal cultural practices, marked as tradition, became the barometer by which colonizers arbitrated political concessions made to the colonized. Here echoes Gayatri Spivak’s famous dictum regarding the colonial project: “white men saving brown women from brown men.” Over time the terms of the woman question have been redictated, from the nineteenth-century formulation of white women’s relation to colonial women as the
“white woman’s burden” to present-day liberal feminist scholars who have become the arbiters of other women’s modernity, or the modernity of the Other Woman. To reinvoke Spivak for the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, then: white women saving brown women from brown men. The white woman’s burden from the nineteenth century is regenerated for contemporary deployment through liberal feminist frames within human rights discourses.

While the woman question has hardly disappeared as a liberal missionary narrative design, it is now accompanied by another formulation: white queers (queer men?) saving brown homosexuals from brown heterosexuals. I call this the homosexual question: How well do you treat your homosexuals? A mere thirty years ago this question was of no relevance to the evaluation of a nation’s capacity for sovereign governance. The homosexual question is in fact a reiteration of the woman question, insofar as it reproduces a demand for gender exceptionalism, relies on the continual reproduction of the gender binary, and as with the advertisement described above, embraces queer bodies that are cisgender and gender conforming. The homosexuals hailed by the nation-state are not gender queer or gender nonconforming—they are, rather, the ones re-creating cisgender norms through, rather than despite, homosexual identity. Obscured by pinkwashing is how trans and gender-nonconforming queers are not welcome in this new version of the proper “homonationalist” Israeli citizen. What was also known as “the Jewish question,” a series of debates in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Europe interrogating the capacity for Jewish populations to assimilate, hinged on religious difference as the defining obstacle to Jews achieving European modernity. Pivotal to my analysis, therefore, is that a quasi resolution to the Jewish question reworks the denigrated effeminate masculinity of nineteenth-century European Jewry into the elevated, rehabilitated, secular, homonationalist masculinity of the occupying and settler colonialist Israeli state.

Pinkwashing also obscures the persistent downplaying of the woman question, and attendant feminist struggles, in relation to the homosexual question. Gender segregation in some ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities in Israel is still an active practice, for one example. Another is how the homosexual question might eclipse the woman question for gay and lesbian consumers. On January 11, 2011, the same day that Tel Aviv’s dubious honor as the “world’s best gay city” was announced, an amendment to Israel’s citizenship laws that prohibits the unification of West Bank Palestinians
with their spouses in Israel was upheld by the High Court of Justice. As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian explains, the citizenship law was approved by the Knesset in 2007 and prohibits Palestinian spouses or children of Israeli citizens from receiving permanent residency or citizenship in Israel. The passage of “social suitability” laws, attempts at regulating sexual activities between foreign laborers and Israeli Jews, and the efforts of vigilante groups and social organizations that monitor and agitate against sexual liaisons between Israeli Jewish women and Palestinian men: these are forms of (hetero)sexual regulation that are submerged in the pinkwashed stories of LGBT liberation. Regulation across homo-hetero divides seeks to constrict the sexual, ethnic, reproductive, and familial activities of all bodies not deemed suitable for the Israeli body politic.

Pinkwashing thus does more than work through an active portrayal of the Palestinian population as homophobic and thus unworthy of liberation; the biopolitical target is arguably even more so the control of heterosexual reproduction. Furthermore, we see in the advertisement described earlier that there are many forms of normativity proliferating. The fact that the opening scene suggests two heterosexual couples reflects certain versions of gender and racial normativity. Blackness in the video stands in for diversity and seeks to solicit African American and Afro-Canadian audiences, while also deflecting from the lack of presence of any notably Arab bodies. This is truly notable given the efforts that the Israeli government is making to recruit African Americans into the Brand Israel project and African American Jews into birthright projects. In Israel, Ethiopian Jewish women have been subjected to forced sterilization, and African populations have been protesting their labor conditions and are connecting to Black Lives Matter organizing. Finally, the reclaiming of small size is worthy of mention. Tourism literature compares Israel to the state of New Jersey—“Israel is the size of New Jersey.” The focus on size might reflect the anxious histories of debilitation and rehabilitation in the establishment and development of the state of Israel. The notation of the “small” size of Israel is often encased in compensatory rhetoric.

In this chapter I am interested in what else pinkwashing regulates besides and alongside sexual orientation. I map out a broader biopolitical portrait of sexual regulation in the Israeli occupation of Palestine and elaborate sexuality as an assemblage not anchored through the prism of queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans identities. I am interested in this particular turn for several reasons that encompass both theoretical and pragmatic organizing
issues. First, as a political response to pinkwashing in the U.S. context, I argue that it is crucial not to reiterate the fantasy of queer exceptionalism by responding to pinkwashing through an appeal to queer solidarity or queer resistance, but rather to connect the regulation of queerness to the regulation of sexuality and bodies writ large. The articulation of the specific connections between different kinds of sexualities—indeed, the sexual regulation of heterosexuality, in fact, miscegenated heterosexuality—not only provides a more nuanced understanding of how sex and biopolitics work in Palestine/Israel but also refuses to return the gaze of the exceptionalizing mandate of the Israeli state that insists on propping up homosexuals as sexual citizens par excellence.21 This portrait of biopolitical reproductive and regenerative mechanisms necessarily implicates convergences of gender, sexuality, race, nationalism, and bodily ability and disability. Finally, what I am adding to the analysis of homonationalism is its imbrication in a nation-building project of rehabilitation, reproductive biopolitics, and the capacity and debility of bodies; how ableism and hetero and homo reproduction are entwined.

This chapter draws on the latest research from Israel 48 (a reference to the 1948 borders of Israel and a term used by those supporting the Palestinian right of return) on reproductive rights, disability organizing, and LGBTQ rights. The analysis offered in this chapter does not seek to approximate or replicate an ethnographic or area studies analysis of the quotidian aspects of living with disability, with queerness, or with the facets of reproductive duress that drive the biopolitical logic of the occupation. Rather, I hope to offer a diagram of sorts that enables researchers to take up these issues in more detail. I also wish, however, neither to reify the method of ethnography nor to prioritize any one version of area studies. The territorial project of Israeli occupation itself already lays bare the paradox of territory, wherein a deep historical connection to the land must be claimed but any genetic connection to the inhabitants of that land must be disavowed.

Rehabilitating the Diaspora

The establishment of the Israeli state itself rests on a model of rehabilitation from two debilitating conditions: the statelessness of the diasporic Jewish people and the genocide of the Holocaust. As early as 1830, the terms “civil disabilities” and “Jewish disabilities” were employed to describe the political disenfranchisement of the Jewish population in England.22 Well before its advent, the mandate for the new Israeli state was one of an