

The Transnational Politics of Breast Cancer Awareness: Corporate Philanthropy as
Foreign Policy*

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One of the things I've appreciated about living in Kingston for the past 9 years is that our pride parade, while not hugely political, has at least managed to escape the worst kinds of corporatization that one sees in bigger cities. We also don't see the battalions of queer police officers, corrections workers, and soldiers that seem to make up an ever-increasing percentage of the contingents here in Toronto. All this changed this past Saturday when for the first time in the 19 year history of the parade, the Canadian military sent an official delegation. Their presence was marked not simply by individual personnel marching in uniform but by an enormous tank that drove down the main street with us. In conversations with mutually astonished friends who had convened the marshal training several nights before, I learned that the Pride Committee had been more concerned about including the Occupy contingent than they had the armored personnel carrier; in fact, the tank had been welcomed into the parade, apparently without comment.

When I spoke with people who were less perturbed than I, they suggested, without exception, that maybe painting the tank pink would fix the problem by, I suppose, making its presence less ominous and more campy. The suggestion that to literally pink wash the vehicle would alleviate the discomfort that myself and others felt with the militarization of our parade, intimated an eagerness to overlook what this weapon represents and enacts; it also reflected the incredible symbolic weight that pink-as-an-alibi-for-gay pride maintains when it is unhinged from complex and historically sensitive notions of identity.

My work on breast cancer responds to a similar—and related—problem: the corporatization of the social movement around the disease and the use of public concern about its prevalence to render invisible a whole spectrum of experiences and relations of power that don't fit within the tyranny of cheerfulness that defines contemporary pink ribbon culture. As resistance to social inequalities, environmental racism, and the medical industrial complex has been driven from the mainstream movement's agenda, breast cancer has become what Adweek called a "dream cause," which can be attached to a seemingly infinite range of concerns, both corporate and governmental. Little did I know when I began researching this issue 13 years ago that my work would lead me to confront a situation in which breast cancer awareness is mobilized to further the interests of the US and its allies in the Middle East.

In the remarks that follow, I offer an account of how breast cancer activism came to be appropriated by a free market feminism working on behalf of an imperialist foreign policy. Exploiting rather than securing women's health, this particular manifestation of pinkwashing works in concert with military and market intervention at the same time that it conceals them. Like Israeli pinkwashing, it trades in images of modernity and it does so in ways that bolster the concerns of the US and its autocratic allies in the region.

In order to understand how breast cancer came to be understood as an appropriate vehicle by which to advance US interests in the Middle East, it is necessary to reflect on the emergence of the disease as a philanthropic cause par excellence in this region. Over the past three decades, large foundations, multinational corporations and government agencies have worked together

to reconfigure breast cancer from a stigmatized disease and individual tragedy best dealt with privately and in isolation, to a neglected epidemic worthy of public debate and political organizing, to an enriching and affirming experience during which women with breast cancer are rarely “patients” and mostly “survivors.” In the latter of these three configurations, the breast cancer survivor emerges as a beacon of hope who through her courage and vitality has elicited an outpouring of corporate and consumer generosity--a continued supply of which, we are led to believe, will ensure that the fight against the disease remains an unqualified success. The sometimes farcical nature of pink ribbon phenomenon reached new heights in 2010, when I came across an advertisement for a breast cancer gun: a black Smith and Wesson 9mm pistol with an awareness ribbon engraved on its slide and an interchangeable bubble gum pink grip. .

The “saving lives by taking lives” logic of the pink ribbon pistol seems only slightly less mind-boggling when one considers that over the past two decades millions of people have become enthusiastic consumers of a slew of potentially harmful pink ribbon items ranging from cosmetics, to household cleaning products, to oil rigs.

Breast cancer has become the consummate “free market feminist” cause, to use Chandra Mohanty’s (2003) term. Like all good practitioners of free market principles, the breast cancer industry has begun to pursue initiatives in new geographic locales, as they seek to expand their markets not only for breast cancer treatments, the fruits of pharmaceutical research, and pink ribbon products, but also for a particular ideology about the disease and how it should best be approached.

Major players are involved: AstraZeneca, the maker of the chemotherapy drug tamoxifen and the creator of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the Komen For the Cure Foundation, and cosmetics giants Avon and Estée Lauder, which since 1999 has pursued its Global Landmarks Illumination Initiative by bathing buildings and monuments in pink lights during the month of October. Sights in the Middle East have included the Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai, the pyramids at Giza, and the Old City of Jerusalem (the latter two actually illuminated by Komen—another sign of the intense competition that exists among major players in the breast cancer industry).

Within this context, the U.S.-Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness (USMEPBCA) marked the U.S. government's first foray into transnational breast cancer policy. Announced in 2006, this public-private venture is a sub-project of the State Department's Middle East Partnership Initiative and involves corporations and non-governmental organizations such as the Komen for the Cure Foundation, the Avon corporation, M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, Johns Hopkins University, and a variety of cancer care and business organizations in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen, and Palestine. This photograph, taken at the Sheikh Khalifa Medical City in Abu Dhabi in October 2007, shows Laura Bush, the program's ambassador, meeting with Emirati breast cancer survivors on the first of two breast cancer diplomacy visits to the region towards the end of George W. Bush's second term in office.

The breast cancer partnership has resulted in the creation of a number of programs including the dubiously titled “Making it Our Business” campaign in Dubai which has the dual aim of “saving lives” and “enhancing the concept of corporate social responsibility” by encouraging companies to launch awareness programs and to offer free screening to employees. Despite the fact Dubai already had in place a free mammography service, which like other aspects of its healthcare system is open to foreigners as well as locals with no identification required (“Dubai Holding,” 2009). Similarly, the “Train the Trainer” program, now operating in the UAE, Dubai, and Jordan teaches employees of multinationals to spread the message of breast cancer screening at work. Participating companies include General Electric (the largest manufacturer of mammography equipment in the world), General Motors, and Johnson & Johnson with the official goals of “mitigating” the effects of breast cancer on participating companies’ employees and customer base and demonstrating the importance of public-private partnerships” and cause-related marketing (Al-Bawaba News, 20 August, 2008). In addition to helping launch these campaigns, the Komen Foundation established a program named Course for the Cure, which invited women from four Saudi Arabian cities came to the U.S. to, in Laura Bushes words, learn “all the things that Komen does in the United States—the pink ribbon, the Races for the cure—all the ways that the word gets out to.... remind American women to be screened” (“State News, 2008”). Back in the Middle East, the number of breast cancer awareness events has mushroomed since the launch of the partnership in 2006 (SLIDES x 3).

Although most of the official partnership activity is concentrated in the Gulf States, the Komen Foundation has also been busy at work in Egypt and Israel. They held their first Middle Eastern

Race for the Cure event in October 2009 among the pyramids at Giza, which were illuminated courtesy of General Electric. The event was announced internationally through a press release claiming that Komen was “expanding its global breast cancer mission to Egypt” (“Pink Pyramids” <http://ww5.komen.org/KomenNewsArticle.aspx?id=6442451411>) by working under the patronage of Suzanne Mubarak, then-First Lady of Egypt, the Breast Cancer Foundation of Egypt, the Suzanne Mubarak Regional Cancer Center for Women’s Health and Development, the Suzanne Mubarak Women’s International Peace Movement, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Official documents also note that Egypt was selected by Komen because of its “need, relative political and economic stability, and the willingness of its high-ranking government officials and many non-government officials to work together in building capacity to address its high breast cancer mortality rates.” The Egypt Race for the Cure was supposed to become an annual event, sponsored by Samsung, and did take place in 2010, but has not been staged since the revolution, a testament to my sense that Komen and the US government are only interested in working with authoritarian regimes in the region.

The first Race for the Cure in Israel took place in 2010, organized through a partnership between Komen, the City of Jerusalem, and Hadassah®, the Women’s Zionist Organization of America. The route took participants around the walls of the old city. The event was widely covered and “mindlessly” celebrated within and outside of Israel as an event that is “bridging the gap between cultures” (JTA). As my friend and colleague Ellen Leopold noted in a letter to the JTA, their coverage created the impression that Palestinian women from the West Bank or Gaza were involved in the Race when they were very likely not. Rather, the event included some

Israeli Arab women, that is, citizens of Israel. Leopold argues that the suggestion that the Komen event generated mutual good will not only blurs the distinction between Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza and Arab Israelis; it also ignores the discrimination of the latter within Israel itself which makes access to quality medical care problematic for many Arab Israelis.

At the same time that such awareness events paper over social injustices, they also advance a particular ideology about how populations should be structured and governed. The public-private mandate of the breast cancer partnership, for instance, works to promote individual and corporate philanthropy as a morally and economically viable and preferable means through which to respond to needs, in the place of the state's role in mitigating the destructive effects of capitalism. In an increasingly privatized "public" sphere, civic commitment is to be expressed not through critical engagement with structures of power, but with privately sponsored educational and research initiatives.

This process is referred to by critics such as Islah Jad (2003), Shahrzad Mojab (2010), and Nahla Abdo (2010) as "NGOization." These authors suggest that the professionalization and institutionalization of Arab social movements and the infiltration of nonprofit organizations into multiple aspects of everyday life over the past two decades can be directly linked to recent US military interventions in the region. According to Abdo (2010), the trend took hold after the 1991 Gulf War. She cites UN estimates that there were 175,000 NGOs operating in Arab states in 1995 and 225,000 in 2003 (UNIFEM, 2004) many of which are funded from the U.S. Figures

compiled by the Brookings Institute show that by 2009, the level of what they call annual “US democracy aid” in the Middle East was more than the total amount spent between 1991 to 2001.

While in diplomacy and development circles, non-governmental projects like the breast cancer partnership are promoted as equivalent to “positive” social change, NGOization has “unleashed a heated debate” in the Arab world. In Jad’s (2003) words, “they have been viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on the West, and as a tool for it to expand its hegemony.”

Indeed, while the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) (the umbrella project of the breast cancer initiative) was launched by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell in the run up to the invasion of Iraq with the goal of “deepening, of our longstanding commitment to working with all peoples of the Middle East to improve their daily lives and to help them face the future with hope,” a 2005 Congressional Research Service report on MEPI suggested that large sectors of the “peoples of the Middle East” had not responded well to the initiative. Although a handful of governments—Morocco, Bahrain, Qatar, and Yemen--welcomed the funds, others, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Oman were less enthusiastic. Meanwhile, the unofficial response, particularly as it was conveyed through the press, was largely negative.

An editorial in the Beirut-based *Al-Safir* newspaper, for example, claimed that the purpose of MEPI was to link “the ambitions of some people in the Arab world to the objectives of the United States, not the objectives of the United States to the ambitions of people in the Arab

world.” One year after the publication of the skeptical congressional report, the breast cancer awareness program was rolled out, with Laura Bush, at that point the subject of an approval rating 30% higher than that of her husband, as its figurehead. During her first visit to the Middle East to promote the program, Bush spoke to a group of students about the project, “asked them not to believe everything they watch on TV or hear about the US,” and expressed her hope that the partnership would illustrate for Middle Easterners the “positive character of US culture” (“Laura Bush builds bridges of hope and concerns,” 2007).

In addition to propagandizing for US interests, bringing this depoliticized, corporatized, and individualized version of an issue into play in contexts such as Egypt and Palestine helps further undermine the work of feminist social movements that have already been compromised what Hanafi and Tabar refer to as an “advocacy, workshops, and training programs” approach to mobilizing women. Law professor Katherine Frank who participated in the LGBTQI solidarity delegation to Palestine in January 2012 also alerts us to how such strategies work to pathologize local cultures:

Foreign support for the Palestinians in the form of money, aid workers and teams of “experts” (myself included) pour into Palestine seeking to improve the lives of women. Millions of dollars, euros or yen are easily available so long as gender-rights frame the “scope of work”. But by “gender” the donors really mean “women”. Just as with gays, Palestinian culture is understood as toxic and dangerous. Thus, Israel traffics in gay rights to “pink-wash” its international reputation, while the donor community “estrogen-washes” virtually all of its work in Palestine. In both cases the “backwardness” of

Palestinian culture and tradition justifies the intervention of others to save its women and gays.

Pro-woman but not feminist, empowered but not enraged, sisterly but not collective and thoroughly disarticulated from questions pertaining to sexual identity, racialization, colonialism or class dynamics, the culture of U.S. breast cancer survivorship represents a potent export in the current geopolitical climate. If NGOization results in a situation whereby so-called “women’s issues” are presented as if they are “suspended in air, disconnected from other interests and needs” (p. 3), the US version of breast cancer awareness came with such disconnection embedded within it, like a built in guarantee of sorts.

While the selection of breast cancer as a diplomatic tool was well thought out and intentional, it had very little to do with the complex realities of women’s health and the place of breast cancer therein across the various locales in which the partnership operates. Recent statistics from the suggest that Arab women in the region have among the lowest rates of breast cancer in the world. I am not suggesting that breast cancer is a non-issue for women in the Middle East, but rather pointing to the lack of evidence that the leaders of this partnership actually pay any attention to figuring out what women’s health concerns might be or where breast cancer fits in to their priorities. In this context, the partnership might be viewed as contributing to a culture of breast cancer risk in the region and hence to building an expanded market for the breast cancer industries.

What we are witnessing here, to sum up, is the appropriation of breast cancer activism by a free market/civil society/missionary feminism articulated to an imperialist foreign policy. This policy, aims not simply to wage war in the name of promoting formal liberal democratic institutions or unseating select autocrats, but is focused on advancing and consolidating the values and practices of individualism, the free market, and private property. In this iteration of imperialism, intervention is justified less often in terms of responding to and routing out terrorism, and more frequently in terms of the need to enforce “democratization,” “modernization,” “economic empowerment,” and other vaguely defined ideals exemplified in the practice of corporatized breast cancer philanthropy and awareness.

The Komen Foundation and their allies in the corporate sector work with the state to promote values and practices, which are legitimized through the re-normalized idea that empire represents a plausible and proper basis for hope, stability, and democracy. Moreover, they do so largely with impunity on the domestic front as social norms place charitable works beyond reproach. Proponents of breast cancer awareness repeatedly claim that breast cancer is external to the realm of politics and transcendent of economic concerns, racial thinking, or gender and sexual norms. Such renderings, however, rely on the erasure of power relations that undergird awareness. In this context, it is vital to make visible the forces of exploitation and exclusion that structure awareness campaigns and the pinkwashing through which they are enabled.

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