

REFLECTIONS ON QUEERNESS IN THE ARAB WORLD

AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMAR HABIB

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May 2011, Toronto

Before the last decade, all we could focus on – as Arab queers – was looking back to the past, determined to uncover our roots, our trajectories as Arab queers living in the Arab world or in the Diaspora. Today, the paradigms are shifting, making us reflect on our present and future, all the while feeding on histories unearthed by the scholars and activists who came before us. Among these scholars is Dr. Samar Habib, an academic who – for many Arab queers – has offered a starting point to question past and current narratives that characterize us as estranged and displaced in our embodiment of queer identities. Through her publication of works such as *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representations*, Dr. Habib has revealed textual and cinematographic representations of what we can today call our actual and representational ancestry. She has provided us with accounts upon which we can reflexively base our understandings of ourselves, our communities and the cultures that we belong to. Much of these revelations have brought with them a shattering of the conception of culture as static, of queer as foreign/Western, of sexuality as singular, and of Arabness as monolithic.

As Arab queers who are personally invested – on the ground, in the classroom and in the spaces in between – we – the authors – wished to open dialogue with Dr. Habib. At the time of the interview, our memories of home(s) were being shocked and stirred with the images and stories being broadcasted to us in the daily newspapers and television news channels. The fall of dictatorships, the rise of peoples' movements, the confusion and evident failures of the West, the bloodshed, the simultaneous plea for nationhood, civil factionary clashes, and rebirth of trans-regional solidarity, the demand for basic rights and the voices of women at the frontlines were brewing in our minds and in our hearts as we watched from afar. Simultaneously, our reflections concerning the relatively recent surge of queer activism and literature in the Arab world and in the Diaspora infused our academic, artistic, and daily projects and experiences. The works of authors, such as Dr. Habib and Dr. Sahar Amer, as well as, the autobiographical works of queer groups such as, *Meem* (Lebanon) and *Aswat* (Palestine), the spoken word poetry of local queer Arabs in our cities, our own academic projects, and the emergence of multiple queer Arab social movements in countries such as Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Lebanon, Canada, the United States, England, Palestine, etc. – have inspired art, political and anti-colonial discourse, community-building, and social movements. Within these projects some common themes surfaced and are currently being explored: the quest for self-definition; the quandary of definition by an Other; the longing for a sense of belonging; the permanence of a sense of displacement; the reality of the colonization of our minds, tongues and bodies; the thirst for community; and the dilemmas of solidarity among others.

It is within this very real and grounded cloud of thoughts that we approached Dr. Habib during the following interview. Out of this state of mind emerged a series of themes from which we built

our interview questions. We were first interested in knowing about Dr. Habib's past and present work, how she came about choosing the topics for research and why she approached these topics the way that she did. We were also interested in understanding how she defined concepts such as homosexuality, queerness, and homophobia, and how these definitions were rooted in her historical analysis of queerness in the Arab world. Conjointly, this meant engaging in a very current debate concerning the provenance of queerness and homophobia (were they a project of Western colonialism/imperialism?). These questions were not only self-involved, but also implied better understanding how to work with non-queer members of our communities. Furthermore, the topic of 'solidarity' and its implications – as a neocolonial effort to manage and oppress and as a strategy to find a common front for unity – was a heated topic of discussion. Finally, Dr. Habib shared with us the future directions of her work. While many subjects were left aside or only dealt with in a more superficial manner than was deserved, we hope that this discussion can inspire a continuation of the many conversations that queer Arabs are having amongst each other, online, and across borders. Furthermore, as Dr. Habib brings forth, these conversational and action-based bridges are also pathways to further empowerment, self-knowledge and definition, as well as community building.

How and why were you interested in current and historical queer/homosexuality issues in your work, such as: *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East: Histories and Representation*, and “Queering the Middle East and the New Anti-Semitism”? In the first book you trace written evidences of female homosexuality in the Middle East, while in the second article you focus on queer political related issues. What brought about your interest in these themes?

I think it was a question of trying to uncover what Foucault would call an “archeology of knowledge” on same-sex relations or desire in the Arab context. It was really a question of trying to reconstruct that kind of desire in ways that were meaningful in my cultural identities. So those primary identities being: Lesbian or queer identified woman, gender atypical queer bodied and also my Palestinian heritage, being born into a condition of statelessness. It began as a question and I was not sure what I was going to find. So my work, my written work, was defined by the material and primary evidence that I collected over the years. As to the question of Palestine and queer politics, I really became interested in that since I was interested in finding something remedial: “How do we get beyond this issue of Zionist and Arab? How do we start thinking beyond national borders and nationalism?” - And queer politics seems to be an appropriate framework. Naturally, the very first article I published, which was “Queering the Middle East and the New Anti-Semitism”, just happened to be about this convergence of my Palestinian identity and my queer identity, through going back to the site of trauma: occupied Palestine. Going back to the site of trauma, I realized that within these homo-national LGBT groups in Israel, there was this really small contingent, at the time represented by the Jerusalem Open House, who really spoke out about Israeli state oppression of Palestinians in the Occupied

Territory and in Palestine itself. For me, there was something healing about identifying groups in Israel that were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. It was also healing to locate myself as an Arab in our history and our Arab history and as a queer Arab to find other non-heteronormative gender and sexual identities going as far back as the 9th century. So, I think it was a process of healing and of remedy.

How do you define concepts such as “queer” and “homosexuality” in your work?

I am not sure if I have ever defined it explicitly, but over the years I have come to realize that “homosexuality” I wanted to use as an a-historical neutral term, like a clinical term, such as same-sex. I did not want it to be used based on its actual origin from medical discourse or as a clinical diagnosis. I like the word “homosexuality”. Queer is also transhistorical; we tend to use “queer” as a sort of umbrella term to identify people across histories. When you say “lesbian” the term is very specific to the island of Lesbos or to Sappho; the term has all these implications. However, somehow, the term “queer” has been dehistoricized in the way “lesbian” has not. Even though “queer” has its very own construct here in the late 20th century, in an academic, privileged, bourgeois discourse. But also, the difference between “homosexuality” and “queer” is that “queer” carries a political identity with it. It is anti-hegemonic; homosexuality does not necessarily have to be anti-hegemonic. Homosexuality also, is a very well defined and specific term, while queer, by its very nature, resists definitions. It is always open to re-definition; it is never a closed concept in the way homosexuality is.

How do you draw on the continuity and change in the conceptualization of the terms (queer/homosexuality) and the experiences of them through looking at these current and historical periods? The traditional or classical terms *suhaqiyya* (lesbian) or *luti* (gay man) in Arabic saw shifts in the past ten to fifteen years, and the terms *mithli* or *mithliya* were introduced. In what way is this transformation in terminology a political and social transformation?

The way to answer this question is to look back at the terminology itself. “Suhaqiyya”, سحاقية, “luti”, لوطي, these terms have a derogatory origin (also, “queer” has a derogatory origin). Let’s start with “suhaqiyya”, for example. It is misogynist, and anti-lesbian or homophobic on a number of levels. It implies that a woman who has a sexual relationship with another woman is entering into a non-copulative sexual act and therefore she is annihilating herself, *suhag*,

“annihilation”. Also, it is a very phallogocentric expression because it refers to *suhaq* as in grinding, so it is this idea that sexual relations between two women cannot be penetrative, which is absurd. So, it is very phallogocentric, patriarchal and misogynist. ‘*Luti*’, of course, brings with it all the textual drama, and damnation of the story of the Lot Tribe in the Quran, which is the most essential text for the Muslim clergy, and that Christian and Jewish orthodoxy rely on to justify homophobia in the whole world. So these are not nice words. In contrast, I know for example that in the 13th century, Ahmad Ibin Yousef al-Tifashi said that same-sex-loving women used to call themselves *tharifat*, which means ‘witty women’. In the same sense, we, same-sex-loving women of the Arabic classic period, had these names that were nice names like *gay*, which is very similar to *tharaf* (wit). So when we name (d) ourselves, we are (were) not using derogatory terms such as *suhaqiyyat*. By the same token in the present we have translated the word “homosexual” to *mithlya* or *mithlyi*, from the word ‘same’; the sameness is important here, and we also dropped beautifully the history of the word being connected to oppressive medical discourse. So the word *mithlya* is more radically empowering than the word “homosexual”, which was never really empowering, but even more empowering than the word “gay” or “queer”, which has its origin in weirdness or in a kind of non-normativity that can be derogatory.

In other works, *Islam and Homosexuality* and *Islamic Texts on Female Homosexuality 800-1500 A.D.* you also engage with Islam and homosexuality; in what ways are your work on Islam and homosexuality and your work on the history of female homosexuality in the Middle East related and what are the trajectories that this work takes in the current issues you are exploring in the Middle East, or even in the context of Israel-Palestine?

That was a series of serendipitous events. I was contracted to work as a lecturer in gender and Islamic studies, and so naturally my research shifted in the direction of my teaching priorities in that particular location at the time. To go back to your first question, in my work relating to Islam and homosexuality, I think when I was looking for this material to try and uncover an archaeology of knowledge, what I found was literature on homosexuality in the Middle East written almost exclusively from the medieval period by Muslim scholars, and some of these scholars identified very clearly with Islam and they spoke from an Islamic discourse of prohibition. Others were only culturally Muslim, so they were more interested in the literary aspect of Muslim majority societies. So in *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, because of the indelibility of early Islam from the Arab civilization itself and the synonymity that comes with that, it seemed like a natural step to go from talking about Muslim majority culture, because

of the Caliphates themselves and these political and social structures of early Islam and hence, literate Arabia, to talk about Islam more broadly. It seems to be a natural consequence from studying cultural texts, to go and study religion and then to ask “what do religious people who identify as gay say, and how do they deal with these tensions around gender and sexual identity and the orthodox version of religion that says you have to have a gender binary which also has to be copulative in its trajectory?” It seemed like a natural step from studying Arabia and the Middle East and North Africa to also include Turkey and Iran, to go and look at Islam itself as another paradigm to study this particular area.

How does this play into Palestine? It has not for me. I find the conflation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with any kind of Islamic studies paradigm to be really problematic, because the Islamification of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination is really only a very recent phenomenon that began in the mid 1980s. It kind of also plays into hegemonic and orientaling discourses about Palestine, making Islam incompatible with notions of democracy. On the contrary, when democratic elections were held in Gaza, the results of these elections were not upheld or accepted by the United States and Israel. For me, I would really resist looking at the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and queer identities through an Islamic studies paradigm; nevertheless I do acknowledge that those are Muslim majority societies.

How do you address issues of Muslim and queer identities in your recent book *Islam and Homosexuality* and what challenges did you face while working on the book?

In *Islam and Homosexuality*, I was the editor, but others have addressed queer issues from anthropological and sociological perspectives, and they were interested in how queer Muslims understand their Islam and their relationship with God in current societies and cultures. I would hesitate now to pursue any further work in Islamic studies because of the absence of institutional support in Western academia for this kind of progressive work. I think there is an inability to envision how Arabs or Muslims can have this kind of progressive outlook. Institutions are generally much more comfortable with “gender and sexuality studies” or “women's studies” but to call that “Islamic studies,” I think they are preoccupied with micro-political managements and worry that this might alienate some Sheikh in Saudi Arabia that throws hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations, not knowing that these Sheikhs donate the money but do not mandate the research. They cannot imagine that we can be complex people and this is the base of my previous experience at the institution that I left in Australia. After *Islam and Homosexuality*

came out, I was told that my title as a lecturer in Gender and Islamic studies would cease to exist without explanation and I must now maneuver myself into an area of studies that is very peculiarly titled “Identity Studies”, so not even “Gender and sexuality” “gender and the Middle-East” but more vague than that. So you can imagine the ethical dilemma that I was facing with all this; all of the sudden *Islam and Homosexuality* comes out and I am no longer appropriate for Islamic Studies any more.

In *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, you present the main discourses used in the Arab World to entertain homophobia, such as medical and religious frameworks. Despite the importance of this work, it seems like you rarely tie these discourses –their emergence and sustainability– to colonial processes that brought them to the Middle East. Why is that?

That is a brilliant question but let me challenge that idea that the Middle East or the Arab World did not know homophobia until it was imported from the West. We have had our own brand of homophobia long before there were Western colonial impositions and conceptual migrations of that kind. We have had homophobia wherever gender and sexual minority persons have existed. There is a *Hadith* about Caliph Abou Bakr, for example, that says that two men were brought to him who was engaged in a same-sex act and the Prophet hadn't really made any pronouncement about what you do with that sort of thing and he made the pronouncement that you kill them. That was way before that medical discourse that the modern Islamic scholars use, especially the ones I address in Chapter One of *Female Homosexuality*. I would hesitate to say that we did not know homophobia, or whatever you want to call it because it is so hard to use these words because they are such modern terms. Let's just say 'revulsion against gender and sexual minority persons'.

However, that is a very important critique of *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, that it rarely – if ever – engages with the colonial processes that brought a very important thing to the Middle East, which is the legislative criminalization in a modern state of same-sex sexual acts. For example, what *Helem* are trying to do in Lebanon; they are trying to repeal the penal code 534 under which gender and sexual minorities get prosecuted. That penal code was brought in by colonial intervention. Lebanon itself in its current statehood was founded by the French after World War I. The situation in Egypt: the debauchery laws were brought in by English colonists. That would have been a very important point to address, to say that under Ottoman occupation –which lasted 600 years– and under the Ottoman brand of Islam, and certainly under the

Abassid brand of Islam before the Ottoman takeover and before the fall of Bagdad to the Mongols in the 13th century, there was nothing punitive legislatively. So yes it was condemned in some cultural circles; the Imam in the mosque might say ‘that’s wrong and you shouldn’t be doing that’ but people did it. It was frowned upon but nobody got punished for it in those particular geographies during those times. So yes, who brought this back and who inspired modern Shari’aa laws? Yes, it was the colonists and that was a very important point that clearly I missed in the book.

I would also want to address the institutional cringe: you know, I was working within a department that did not encourage that kind of critical work about colonial interventions in the Middle East and any kind of criticism in that vein. For some reason, it is okay to be critical of colonial intervention in India. I am not sure why it is so depoliticized. It is because it is not current, it is not still ongoing. I always have to attribute that omission in *Female Homosexuality* to the institutional constraints that are placed on research in one’s early career. Surely as I progress, I am better able to address these things and better able to liberate my research agenda from institutional constraints.

Considering that homophobia did exist, could we agree that the ways in which we frame our homophobia –whether it be through the legal system which creates certain widespread campaigns against homosexual or the pathologies that are created in the medial system– is in fact internalized from the West? In other words, while communities in the Middle East may be thinking that they are rejecting the West by rejecting homosexuality, they are in fact internalizing Western thoughts related to homosexuality brought in through colonial processes?

Absolutely - it’s not only Western, it is both contemporary to evangelical discourses in the US but it’s also the same discourse used in the 1950s sexologies in the US, Europe and in North America generally. None of the arguments that these modern critics of homosexuality come up with haven’t already been proposed or are not already being circulated, particularly in ex-gay style institutions. But also we have our very own culturally specific brand of homophobia and we bring in this residue from religious discourse as well, from the weak or unauthenticated *Hadiths* about the Prophet, from the Quranic version of story of Lot (*lut*) and I think in India recently the repeal of the law that criminalized homosexuality (a lot of people really supported the repeal of that law because it was a residual colonial law). So I think rhetorically that is a really good strategy, to say ‘you know what, we used to let people do what they wanted. It is their business. It is up to Allah to punish them. You don’t have to police people on the street. You don’t need a vice squad, you

don't need a moral police." But in the modern Islamic republic and the modern Islamic monarchy such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, that is exactly what they have. But I'm also quite certain that if there wasn't a Western discourse with which to engage, that the Arab modern scholastic institutions would have created their own discourse to pathologize and medicalize gender and sexual non-normativity because we can come up with our own homophobia, but that we didn't need to, that we can rely on these outdated discourses is also true.

Do you believe that bringing the colonial processes narrative to mainstream audiences in the Middle East would help counter homophobia?

I think you've identified a very good rhetorical strategy because what I am seeing now is that we - us queers of the Arab world - have always had this accusation leveled at us, that we are West identified and that we are also agents of Western sabotage, that they are trying to infiltrate our culture by imploding it from within.

What I am seeing now as well is that a lot of these groups are also showing political solidarity with the mainstream Arab World that rejects them, saying we are against all forms of oppression, be it colonial, be it imperial, be it capitalistic in nature from within (like class oppression) and we are also as Arab as you: We work in the same institutions, we cook the same food, we love the same music, we have the same families and the same ties to those families. Many of us have the same aspirations like reproductive aspirations, for example. That idea that homosexuality is a Western import also comes from the West. It is also a Western discourse that is relied on in the Middle East. It is a very popular academic discourse and it really works to sabotage the authenticity of what it means to be a sexual or gender minority outside of a Western framework.

And I'm seeing it a lot now that groups like *Helem* and *Meem* and *Al-Qaws* and *Aswat* are building their rhetorical strategies around supporting their communities that reject them. For example, during the second Israeli invasion of Beirut in 2006, *Helem* turned their premises into a shelter for people. They are engaging the outer community and saying 'we are with you in this struggle. We are discriminated against by this West you think we are agents of in the same way. When we get bombed, we die with you.'

The problem with homophobia is that it doesn't change overnight. It is something we need to work on in a very long process.

It is said by many authors that the new wave of imperialism (possibly rising post-September 11), which is justified by a 'human rights intervention' discourse, has granted Western queer and gay movements a new neo-colonial role which resembled the one played by Western feminist movements currently and in the past. Do you imagine this rise in what is said to be "transnational queer solidarity" to be a dangerous or fruitful one?

I think that you have identified here Edward Said's thesis: the idea that Liberal Western feminism played a critical role in justifying military interventions in the Middle East. And then you have also identified Joseph Massad", Said's protégé's, thesis replica in relation to the LGBT or gay international as he calls it. What interests me is that I would really like to make a distinction between transnational queer solidarity and LGBT NGOs. LGBT NGOs can be problematic in the way they approach gender and sexual minority oppressions in third world contexts. There is this issue that can be problematic and I think the person who actually illustrated this much more effectively and not simply polemically is Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages*. She really shows where this problem lies: how these discourses can be inherently racist and culturally remain without nuance. At the same time, I would like to envision transnational queer solidarity as different from LGBT NGOs. Solidarity is just a sense of affinity, a sense of political convergence, whereas when NGOs come down to it and do the hard work, it really depends on the cultural sensitivities of the people devising policy and setting the programs, who is donating and how are they influencing the agenda. But also I don't think there is a monolith within LGBT NGOs either, and what about NGOs that are formed as grassroots groups and organizations from within the third world, or the non-western world? It's a very peculiar generalization to say all of these are complicit with neo-imperialism. Or that you can't do anything, you must sit in a straight jacket because you are cooperating with Western incitement to discourse. I think we need incitement to discourse - that is exactly what we need.

Do you believe that queerness, in the way that is understood in the West, can be superimposed on queer MENA realities? For example, in *Female Homosexuality in the Middle East*, you talk about the *suhaiyya* (grinder) to refer to more masculine women who only engaged sexually with other women and you make a distinction between the more masculine Lesbian *suhaiyya* and the bi-sexual women who was not called *suhaiyya*. In Western LGTBQ contexts this could be called butch-femme, in your opinion did these binaries exist in the Middle East during the period you speak about (9th-13th century Middle East)?

I am not sure that I ever said that only masculine same-sex loving women were identified as *suhaqiyyas*. It was actually just believed that the feminine ones could be reconverted. I very much think that is untrue... but again it is in that male, patriarchal imaginary that we understand her: She wants to be a man, but you, what is wrong with you? You just haven't met the right man. That is the distinction - they still use these discourses to delegitimize feminine female homosexual identities.

I wonder if queerness is even understood in the *West*. Maybe the West understands Lesbian and Gay much better, but this concept of Queer is really very much understood by fewer in the West and fewer people within the Lesbian and Gay community or transgender community even. You have to remember that we have homonormativity, we have transnormativity, we have people who only understand Lesbian or Gay as only a lifestyle issue: who want to marry, who want to have kids, and we have trans people who do not want to acknowledge their birth biological sex and want to identify as exclusively female or male. Not that there is any issue with that but I think that this "Queer" is not even understood in the West.

Thirdly, in Western LGBT contexts - and this could be called butch/femme - can these be superimposed on the period I speak about? Well, in what way can they be superimposed, I would ask? Can we say that there were masculine women who had attractions to feminine women who had attractions to masculine women? Yes of course. Is it butch/femme in the style of New York City in the 1950s where masculine women would pass off as men, and hence be able to live with their partners? Probably not because that is a condition of a modern metropolis, a post-industrial society of alienation and condensed populations. How can you pass that off in a small city where everybody knows everybody and that's so and so's daughter. I mean, it could happen but then they would only be phenomenologically butch/femme, only in a cursory way but not in any kind of deep and meaningful way. But have there always been masculine female attractions to feminine female attractions and vice versa? Of course. I don't see why not and it's in the literature as well: there are two kinds of grinders say Al Samaw'uli and Al Yamani. There are the masculine ones and there is nothing you can do about them, they say, and then there are the feminine ones and maybe we can do something about them, they say. They just have to meet the right guy. Is that true? Of course not.

While "radical movements" often feel like they might be immune to reproducing oppression, when we speak of transnational alliances, colonial histories demand of us to acknowledge power relations. Do you believe "solidarity" can exist and

express itself outside of a neo-colonial framework, and in this sense benefit all parties involved?

Yes I do believe that solidarity can exist and express itself outside of a neo-colonial framework. I just do not know how transnational organizing can achieve that. I think on an individual atomic level, from person to person, that sense of solidarity to understand that there are other people undergoing your struggles is important. A very good example are the LGBT communities in Israel which have been co-opted by a nationalist discourse and this kind of homonationalism permeates the LGBT community in Israel precisely because the Israeli state, in comparison to many other modern states in the region, gave its gender and sexual minority Israeli citizen a bit more recognition. It is not like there is gay and lesbian marriage in Israel, it is not like there are equal inheritance laws. But the idea that I want equality for just me and my lot, rather than I want universal social justice is really problematic and it is not Queer. The whole point of Queer – and that is why I say to you that I believe that there can be queer transnational solidarity because the idea is that I want social justice for all, for everyone who is oppressed: for the gays, and lesbians, and transgendered, inter-sexed, queer, people, and bisexual people. I would also want it for religious fundamentalists should they happen to exist in contexts where they are being persecuted. It's ironic, how universalist queer can be, in relation to social justice. So, of course I do not think you can have a queer identity or have a radical movement that doesn't identify transnationally with those other oppressed groups and wherever those groups maybe not just gender and sexual minorities, but also Palestinians in the occupied territories, and not just Palestinians in the occupied territories, but oppressed persons wherever and whoever they may be.

Finally, we would like to hear your reflections on your past and present (or future?) work.

Currently I have been looking at the autobiographical narratives that have been emerging from the Middle East on gender and sexual minority autobiographical narrative. There is the autobiography called *Randa the Trans* that came out of Beirut. There are also the books by Aswat *Haqi an Akhtar an A'esh an Akoun* and *Waqfet Banaat*, and *Bareed Musta'jil* from Meem. I have been so far looking at the intersection of religion and gender and sexual minorities and provide an intensive reading as to what these autobiographies have in common across the Middle East and North Africa. I am really also interested in this amazing new rise in grassroots organizing within the Arab World for gender and sexual minority rights, and not just rights to try

and enter the hegemony or the state, but organizing really for social support, for having a cross regional Queer Arab transnational counterculture that I see is flourishing like this revival of Arab solidarity in the Middle East. So I want to document that.

If you were to revisit your work, what critiques would you have towards it?

I have a lot of critiques of my work. Every time I read I think I would love to change things but I think this is the nature of scholarship. I think a good critique of *Female Homosexuality in the Middle-East* I would have is not having engaged sufficiently with the concept of “queer”. I think I handled in great details the issue of essentialism and constructionism and the issue of a-historical narrative of gender and sexual identities across time and space, but I did not address the issue of “queer”. Mainly, I did not acknowledge how the term “lesbian” can be problematic and how “queer” - just by its potential to be redefined unlike the terms “lesbian” and “homosexual” - could have actually served better. It could have been *Female Queerness in the Middle East*.

The other thing is the issue that you raised. Originally I had in the introduction a lot of criticism of Western imperialism and this Arab identification of homosexuality as an identity with the West being itself born of colonial discourse and as a result of colonial imposition. Arabs were trying to define themselves by everything their oppressor was not, so if the oppressor has gays we don't have gays, if the oppressor does not execute, and then we do. That is how we define ourselves in relation to the other. So I really did not take up that issue which was also very important. I began to but I remember taking out these passages.

Other passages are my critique of, then *Public Culture* article, of Masaad's *Reorienting Desires (Desiring Arabs* had not come out yet). I remember being critical of that article, but in my revisions I decided to leave it for another project.

I am sure there is a lot in my critique that can and will be disputed in time, but this is the very essence of scholarship. If a work does not become out of date and remains forever current then I am sure it is not a work of scholarship.

With the recent surge of widespread intifadas taking place in MENA, do you feel like queer activism in the region will take a new spin? Are you interested in

working on the subject? Also, in what sense can we imagine the breaking of borders in the Middle East?

The recent wide spread Intifadas in the Arab world and their relation to queer activism... It is my hope that the youth leading the Tunisian revolution and the Egyptian revolution and the Lebanese youth - that this generation will be more liberal, without all the baggage that comes with that word in the Western context, than the last. I hope we can institute some measures toward civic plural societies and try and shed some of the rigid traditions that have held us back from being in dynamic flux. I see those intifadas as really amazing transitions because we have been constantly accused in Western discourse that justified military interventions in the region of being incompatible with democratic movements or being inherently incapable of being democratic, yet we have shown the West how revolutions are made. In the western contexts one is oppressed without even realizing that one is oppressed because one votes for a two party-system and in the Arab world in this particular time, the wheel of fortune is still spinning and yet we do not know where this is going to take us, this very moment and state of uncertainty and ambiguity.

In revolution there is tremendous potential of where we are going to end up and it is an exciting time. I never thought I would see this in my lifetime. People have had enough of rulers who are complicit with a western imperial agenda and of not having enough to eat. It is my hope that by instituting proper democracy we will have civic pluralism so that people might still ostracize you for being a gender or sexual minority person but they won't attack you or imprison you.