IJoC Sexuality Research in Communication

Queering the Mother Tongue

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I have a vague memory of the first time I saw *Barra* magazine when I was a teenager. I purchased *Barra* out of excitement that it was in Arabic, and not just any Arabic: Its very title promised to offer material in colloquial Lebanese, *barra* being Lebanese for "out." I don't remember whether I understood the connotation at the time. I did know what *gay* meant, as I, like most people of my generation and socioeconomic background, grew up surrounded by American movies, series, and music. *Gay* was linked to the West, and in Arabic subtitles on local television was translated into *shadh* (deviant). I remember going home and reading *Barra*. This was, in fact, my first memory of reading about sex in Arabic, about sex in Lebanon.

I begin this essay with a teenage memory not to indulge a hyper self-consciousness, but out of a desire to make my writing and thinking process less opaque. It is out of a belief that reflecting on why we write—or struggle to write—about certain things is an essential step toward understanding the research we conduct. It is, finally, out of a conviction that the poetic and the political are inseparable and that "science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes" (Clifford & Marcus, 1986, p. 2). Researchers on Arab sexuality often have paid attention to historical processes in the formation of new erotic configurations. This essay focuses on linguistic processes in the making of queer sexual identities in Lebanon. It deals with the methodological challenges of translation that arise when we attempt to make intimacies, erotics, and sex legible in an already globalized world, foregrounding an unease with language that is expressed by activists and scholars.

Georges Marcus (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) writes that "Human ways of life increasingly influence, dominate, parody, translate, and subvert one another" and that cultural analysis is "always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power" (p. 22). The analytical categories we use as researchers are enmeshed in these global movements. Academic writing does not operate outside these flows; it is *part* of them. Given that so many gender and sexuality analytical categories were first developed for the Euro-American context, "how can we make sure that in studying gender systems in other cultures, we do not resort to another form of Eurocentrism, less obvious but more insidious because it is methodological rather than topical?" (Strasser & Tinsman, cited in Najmabadi, 2006, p. 18). How do we make sense of the appearance of putatively Euro-American categories of sexual affinity elsewhere? And how do we reflect on our own role as researchers in the production of subject effects through the categories we choose in conducting research on sexuality? What follows is a series of reflections on how words and categories around sex travel, and how both queer activists and researchers understand this movement.

Entering the Erotic Field

In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism,* the late Edward Said (1994) describes the book as an "exile's book":

> For objective reasons that I had no control over, I grew up as an Arab with a Western
> education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds,
> without being completely *of* either one or the other. (p. xxvi)

For reasons beyond their control, many people in Lebanon grow up learning French or English along with Arabic, in American or French schools and universities, most of which were established by missionaries. And yet they are not in exile. Many from the middle and upper classes grow up as Arabs with a hybridized, Western education—minus sex ed classes. For many, sexual knowledge is shaped by foreign media consumption: for instance, learning about contraception from girls' and women's magazines or discovering sexual practices in porn. Local representations of erotic desire—the normative as well as the deviant—in the verbal and visual landscape of Arab mass media are scarce. Arab literature fares much better than contemporary media in its depictions of erotic desires, which may explain why most research on homosexuality has focused on literary texts (Al-Samman, 2008; Amer, 2012; El-Rouayheb, 2005; Massad, 2007; Smith, 2012). On television, intimate kissing or making-out scenes were in English, because they were mostly from U.S. movies or series. Sometimes they were in formal *fusha* Arabic, in the dubbed Latin American telenovelas of the 1990s, broadcast on local Lebanese television channels. Occasionally, they were in colloquial Egyptian, in the black-and-white movies of the 1950s and 1960s, aired on Arab satellite channels in the early 2000s. Sex scenes were in English. And in the very few, awkwardly scripted Lebanese series, it is extremely rare to see two people intimately kissing. In 2012, an on-screen kiss between the male and female stars of a Lebanese-Egyptian hit series *Ruby* became a subject of controversy, stirring debate among Arab audiences. The actors, in fact, had not actually kissed. The Lebanese star Cyrine AbdelNour, in a talk-show appearance on a pan-Arab station, performed the acting trick of the fake kiss with the host, who explained: "Those are the tricks you use, you know, because it's the Arab world, and a kiss . . ." to which AbdelNour responded: "There was absolutely no kiss."

Which brings me back to *Barra*. When it was launched in 2005, the magazine was an attempt to discuss homosexuality, and sexuality more broadly, in Arabic. Although it circulated in small circles and did not have mass appeal, *Barra*'s step was an important one. Issue 0 included a "glossary of Arabic expressions," which translated English words such as *bisexual* and *transsexual* into Arabic, when Arabic alternatives were unavailable and at a time when the modern vernacular of Arabic media was highly sanitized. It is therefore not uncommon to tap into multiple foreign cultural sources, filling the gaps in the local vernacular—visual and verbal—through cultural practices of collage and translation. For instance, the word *sex* is more common in everyday conversation than the formal Arabic *jins*. *Sex* stands out in a sentence that is otherwise entirely in colloquial Lebanese Arabic. This is one example of the everyday, banal cultural practices of meaning making that inform broader questions about global cultural influences on local discourses of sex. Although using English words does not automatically make one Westernized and does not make what is signified a product of the West, Euro-American influences on the rest of the

world must be recognized without recurrence to the fictions of unities and polarities, without making such statements as "this is like the West" or "this is not like the West."

In fact, studies of Arab and Islamic sexualities have shown that laws against homosexuality had been instituted during the colonial era, and archival research rediscovered the historical tolerance and idealization of same-sex desire in parts of the Muslim world (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Landry, 2011; Massad, 2007; Najmabadi, 2005). Although these interventions subverted the Eurocentric orientalizing gaze that cast Muslim societies as inherently repressive, their historical insights should not be mistaken as readings of modern-day configurations of sexuality. Historical analyses are not ethnographic accounts. Accordingly, we need to recognize the limits of archival and literary research in studying contemporary sexuality. For instance, to what extent can the idealization of man-boy love in classical poetry inform our understanding of the social experiences of self-identified gay men today? What have historiography as a privileged method and literature as a privileged corpus of study do, to rephrase Najmabadi's (2006) words, in terms of questions we have *not* asked in investigations of Arab sexualities? What questions can communication scholars ask?

Aware of the restrictions on public expressions of erotic desire in mainstream media and culture, I became increasingly interested to locate spaces that cultivate an alternative visual and verbal language. This led me to identify an emergent sphere of cultural production in Lebanon that produced social critiques about gender roles and sexual norms. This included traditional media, such as the mushrooming stencils and graffiti on Beirut walls, as well as the digital spaces of queer blogs and e-zines. Perhaps my interest also was dictated by issues of access: As a graduate student residing abroad and unable to conduct extensive fieldwork, my research projects mostly involved the online circulation of these subcultural discourses. It drew on textual and visual analyses of media materials that queer activists posted on blogs or Facebook pages, on long-distance interviews via Skype or chat, but also on analyses of mainstream media coverage of deviant sex and sexualities.

But as I started writing my observations and consolidating them into article-long arguments, it became clear to me that I was unable to write a conclusion. I was still grappling to define words—*gay*, *LGBT* —defending and justifying the use of certain categories. My inability to conclude was symptomatic of a larger issue: I was writing the wrong article all along. The object of study, the research's starting point, should have been my unease with using words such as *gay*, *LGBT*, *queer*, and *homosexual* and an equal unease with using the Arabic *mithli* (homosexual) or *shadh* (deviant) to talk about nonnormative desires, identities, and gender roles in Lebanon. Why is there a theoretical and practical feeling of unease that haunts the topic? Does the unease stem from the theoretical limitations of these terms? Is the unease of using English words the same as the unease of using Arabic ones? If the Arabic terms were translations from English, is there a guilt associated with the act of translation itself? And is this because translation is the empirical evidence of the cultural inauthenticity associated with these terms? Does the unease stem from a fear that the foreignness of these signifiers betrays the foreignness of what is signified? This essay is an attempt to diagnose a feeling, a certain unease with categories as they emerge in language. This very tension with language, haunting the writing process, constitutes one of the main methodological and theoretical challenges in my inquiry into nonnormative sexualities in Lebanon.

The Burden of Categories

Foucault foregrounded the importance of tracing the genealogies of social categories. Homosexuality, for instance, only emerged as a separate category in the 19th century. In a now-famous passage, Foucault (1990) asserts,

> Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

Scholars studying non-Western sexualities warned against the universalization of Euro-American histories and epistemologies. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2006) questioned the analytical usefulness of the binary category of gender to study Iranian sexual modernities. And in his pathbreaking analysis of the discourse on Arab homoerotic desires, Joseph Massad (2007) vehemently argued that the category homosexual is a product of the West:

> The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating. (p. 41)

Frederic Lagrange (2000) explains, "As in all culture-related subjects, words are controversial and much debate has been aroused by the use of the term homosexuality in relation to classical, pre-modern and present Arab societies" (p. 170). According to Massad (2007), "Words for homo/heterosexuality were invented recently as direct translations of the Latin original: '*Mithliyyah*' or sameness in reference to homosexuality and '*ghayriyyah*' or differentness in reference to heterosexuality" (p. 172). These additions to the standard Arabic lexicon originated in translations of Freudian psychoanalysis.

The classical Arabic language, Lagrange argues, categorizes different types of homosexual *acts*, not identities, in specialized terms. Accordingly, "Research on same-sex eroticism in Arabic literature has been very cautious with its vocabulary, preferring in place of 'homosexuality' terms such as 'homoeroticism' or 'same-sex sexuality'" (Lagrange, 2000, p. 171). For Pratt Ewing (2011), "Muslims are less troubled by sex and desire in all their possible forms than they are by the peculiar modern practice of naming our sexualities as the basis for secular public identities" (p. 89). While the use of a transhistorical and decontextualized category Muslims does not seem to trouble the author, naming one's sexuality amounts to "essentializations [that] are typically a part of the very structure of 'coming out' stories" foreign to Muslims (Pratt-Ewing, 2011, pp. 93–94). In his analysis of the 2002 police arrest of 52 gay Egyptian men in the infamous Queen Boat Affair in Cairo,[1] Massad (2002) asserts that it was not "same-

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[1] On May 11, 2002, Egyptian police arrested 55 men at the Queen Boat, a Cairo discotheque moored on the Nile, across from the affluent neighborhood of Zamalek. Eventually, 52 men were charged with the practice of *fujur*, or debauchery, which penalizes, among other deviant sex practices, sex between men.

sex sexual practices that were being repressed by the Egyptian police but rather the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek" (p. 382). Both anti-identitarian critiques diagnose the naming of desires rather than the desires themselves as the cause of social unease. By doing so, they disregard subjects' desire to identify with a broader public and, in the case of Massad, treat this as a desire to identify with the West. As Najmabadi (2008) astutely notes,

> Perhaps one of the problems with the current heated debates between proponents of "global gay" and opponents of "gay international" resides in the presumption, common to both groups, that "I am gay," or "I am transsexual" means the same thing anywhere it is pronounced. (p. 37)

Struggle for Words

Claims about contemporary queer Arab sexualities that do not engage the views of living desiring subjects are ethically fraught. Ironically, what is marginalized in many scholarly accounts is the voice of the desiring Arabs themselves. Evidently, not all projects fulfill the same research agenda. However, when the critique is directed to the *publicness* of nonnormative desires, investigating how they are *communicated* within and across societies is an important first step. As Povinelli and Chauncey (1999) have put it, "what should it matter to social accounts of sexuality that intimate spaces are created by multiple textual forms—speech, cyberspace, film, television, telephonic media—produced vast distances from the site of their consumption?" (p. 445). What should it matter that they are created in different codes?

Fran Martin (2003) highlights the complex mix of Chinese and English terms in the Taiwanese lesbian magazine *Ai Bao*. Martin understands the magazine's use of the English term *queer nation* and its Chinese translations as an instance of "cultural translation": There is not one but many Chinese words used to translate *queer*. The term *tonghzi* appeared in Taiwan Mandarin via Hong Kong as a translation of the English term *queer* but then shifted to signify lesbian/gay identity. "At issue here, then, is not simply a translation between English and Chinese, but also the translations between 'lesbian/gay' and 'queer' and the translation of that translation into Taiwan's cultural context" (Martin, 2003, p. 4).

Similar tensions arise around the word *mithli,* the Arabic translation of homosexual, which was appropriated by some Arab queer activists as the politically correct alternative to the commonly used *shadh* (deviant). During a 2010 campaign for the International Day Against Homophobia, Lebanese queer activists attempted to reclaim the word *shadh* in a statement saying "*Eh ana shadh*" (yes I am a deviant). While *queer* has been reclaimed in the United States, *shadh* still carries the stigma of deviance in a Lebanese and broader Arab cultural context. Internal translations between lesbian/gay and queer, as Martin (2003) explains, intimates the inadequacy of a "binary transnational framework in which 'English' always confronts 'Chinese' [or Arabic] as its mirroring other" (p. 4). As one Lebanese queer activist

pointed out in an interview, people in the community were divided around terminology, with many being uncomfortable with the use of *shadh* (personal communication, March 19, 2013).

In fact, the problem of language and translation is frequently discussed by Arab queer activists themselves (Ritchie, 2010). Rauda Morcos, one of the founders of Aswat (Voices), a Palestinian organization for lesbians, states: "I have forgotten my language, I don't know how to say 'to make love' in Arabic without it sounding chauvinistic, aggressive, and alien to the experience" (quoted in Whitaker, October 2, 2006). Commenting on their HIV/AIDS awareness resources, activists in Helem, a Lebanese LGBT organization, contend that, although many materials are available in English, they are lacking in Arabic. "This causes a problem within Helem's work as Arabic is the main language spoken and understood by the population" (Helem, 2008, p. 40). As Morcos put it, "This is not simply a matter of translation; it's about developing a 'mother tongue' with positive, un-derogatory and affirmative expressions of women and lesbian sexuality and gender . . . we are creating a language that no one spoke before" (quoted in Whitaker, October 2, 2006). Developing a mother tongue, then, is among the main challenges of Arab queer activists today.

Massad suggests that it is more appropriate to talk about Arab "same-sex practitioners" than gays or lesbians. However, using such a categorization that foregrounds practices rather than identities is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is the fact that it is rhetorically dehumanizing. This should not be mistaken as a call to sanitize gay sex by romanticizing it, or to legitimate it by foregrounding gay love or intimacy. There needs to be a balance: Yes, this could be just about sex, but is there nothing else binding "practitioners"? The terminology we use must allow us to imagine and put into words queer intimacies and affects "the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer lives" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7).[2] Rather than undoing the identity politics signified by the categories gay or lesbian, same-sex practitioners has the effect of foreclosing any possibility for the emergence of a public around shared human experiences that exceed the confines of the bedroom. In addition, even as he problematizes Western taxonomies, Massad's use of the term *same-sex* brushes over the complexities of gender. What about sex between men who identify as women and have sex with gender-normative men? Are these still considered same-sex? Is sex here referring to biological sex or gender identity? To quote Najmabadi (2006), adopting the concept of same-sex "may have trapped our thinking of human relations bound by the contours of the 'same-sex-ness' of those relationships," making "sex" the truth of these relations and "regenerating the binary of male and female bio-genital difference as the defining mark of that truth" (p. 17). In other words, the sexual burden of homosexuality is replaced with the gender burden of same-sex.

Literary scholar Sahar Amer (2012) suggests that Arab queer activists, particularly lesbians, should return to old Arabic designations of lesbian eroticism that abound in classical Arabic literature and poetry. The adoption of Arabic instead of the ostensibly foreign words *gay* and *lesbian* would highlight the authenticity of these desires. Amer's suggestion reinscribes the argument that discredits emergent queer

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[2] Ann Cvetkovich's work on trauma and queer archives foregrounded the role of affect in the formation of queer public cultures. She proposed the recognition of affective forms of citizenship and the reconsideration of the conventional distinctions between political and emotional life.

identities on the basis of linguistic impurity: They are in English, therefore inauthentic. It also redefines authenticity as a celebration of the past, in this case through the resuscitation of old Arabic idioms for current usage. While this is a provocative suggestion, could this terminology fit in everyday conversation flow? And as researchers, can we use these terms if they are not used by individuals themselves in their self-description? Reflecting on the language debates, Helem cofounder Ghassan Makarem (2011) explains, "While the debate about the nature of the word 'homosexual,' the propriety of using the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' in a non-English speaking setting, and the attempts to identify ownership of these categories might be of utter theoretical importance," people can and do operate with ambiguous categories even if some analysts cannot (p. 101). A new question, perhaps, is how do these people live despite or through ambiguity?

Researching Ambiguity

Using ethnography or textual and visual analyses, sexuality studies in communication can make ambiguity their object of research, conceptualizing it as a queer rather than inauthentic cultural formation. Emergent sexual identities, even as they are influenced by foreign cultural elements and political forces, are performed in the local vernacular, spoken with an accent. In his study of queer subjectivities in Indonesia, Tom Boellstorff (2003) introduces "dubbing culture" to conceptualize the relationship between persons and the cultural logics through which they come to occupy subject positions under contemporary globalizing processes. He argues:

> *Gay* and *lesbi* subjectivities do not originate in the "West" (they are not perceived as diasporic), nor are they a hybrid of "West" and "East"; they are distinctively Indonesian phenomena, formed through discourses of nation and sexual desire as well as a sense of linkage to distant but familiar Others. (p. 226)

Boellstorff italicizes *gay* and *lesbi* to keep them distinct from the English terms. In a similar vein, Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008) explains that, in Iran, loan words and expressions such as *straight*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *transsexual*, *homosexual*, *top*, *bottom*, and *versatile*—largely picked up from the media—are pronounced in Persian just as they are in English and are freely used in discussion. She asks, "How do these enunciations mean differently, and do a different cultural work, in Tehran compared with New York?" (p. 37).

Communication scholars Kraidy and Murphy (2003) argue that media consumption is "one of the defining activities of the global-local nexus. It is perhaps the most immediate, consistent, and pervasive ways that 'globality' is experienced" (p. 310)—and, I would add, how globality is imagined. What does it mean to imagine new sexually inflected subjectivities in an already globalized world? Arjun Appadurai (1996) locates in mass media—with its practices of collective reading, criticism, and pleasure—the condition for the emergence of a "community of sentiment," a group that "begins to imagine and feel things together" (p. 8). Imagination, in its collective form, creates new modes of belonging and cultivates new networks of affinity. The projective power of imagination to render an "otherwise" instead of the "what is" is made evident in the everyday cultural practices of those we have come to define as a queer community in Lebanon. Understood as such, the invention of new words is not about succumbing to

imperialist agendas, but about imagining new ways of being. Amid a dearth of locally produced representations of the erotic or the intimate in a social context that stigmatizes public expressions of sex, this community was able to carve out spaces where nonnormative intimacies can germinate. Berlant (1998) writes:

> Desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place? To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon? As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures. (p. 285)

What would the aesthetics of the extreme look like in different places? They could be modes of representation—words, images, sounds—that were previously nonexistent, or that may have existed in private or secret spaces. The extreme also may lie in the very act of making such aesthetics public: Wearing a certain outfit, dancing a certain way, frequenting certain places, saying words, raising flags, or simply not having to self-censor and hide in the presence of others. Communication scholarship may engage issues of public naming, identification, and performance differently. Moving away from the archive of the past, new approaches may consider media as an archive of the present—a central space where queerness is expressed, represented, and sometimes censored.

New research seems to focus on the communication of Arab queer identities (al-Qasimi, 2011; Gagne, 2012; McCormick, 2011). The example of *boyah* in the Arab Gulf is instructive. *Boyah* is a lexicalization of the English *boy* followed by the Arabic feminine suffix *-ah*. As Noor al-Qasimi (2011) notes, the word refers to the self-stylizations of lesbian butch identities in what has become an increasingly visible subculture within Arab Gulf States. Boyah's semiotic power is both in its performative transgression of normative femininity through butch aesthetics and its linguistic transgression of monolingualism. The Arabic female suffix *-ah* queers an otherwise English word while simultaneously queering the otherwise masculine *boy*. This term, an amalgamation of multiple languages and genders, encodes a new and local form of queer embodiment.

While new media technologies enable new ways of speaking, and of being, they restrict others. In his study of Lebanese men's use of gay dating websites, Gagne (2012) explains that the language capacity of the site limits those who can use it based on a required conversance in English, noting that "users' understanding and interpretation of the categories may vary from that of their native language" (p. 119). Users have to work with the identity categories and languages made available by the website. The media interface, then, does determine the modes and forms of expression. I encountered this issue while conducting an online interview with Youssef, a Lebanese self-identifying gay man. I had scheduled a Skype interview with Youssef to ask him about his personal history within the queer community. However, because of a technical problem with Youssef's microphone (I could see but not hear him), we opted for typing instead. During the interview, Youssef heard me asking questions in Arabic and wrote his responses in English.

When I realized that Youssef had trouble expressing himself in English, I proposed switching to Arabic. He started transliterating Arabic words in Latin letters, a practice widely used online by Arabic speakers: While the conversation is in Arabic, the transcript is in Latin letters and is unintelligible to a non-Arabic speaker. Of course, many Lebanese and Arabs do type in Arabic letters. But many are used to the English keyboard and find it easier to transliterate instead. While socioeconomic background can explain individual communication preferences, it does not determine them, and it would be precarious to assume that people of lower classes use Arabic while those of upper classes use English letters when typing online. How would we characterize the code difference between the oral and written conversations? Does it necessarily map onto the embodied-virtual distinction? How do we make sense of the interception of the oral Arabic conversation with words like *gay*, *drag*, and *queer* and the Arabization of the English script? Instead of thinking of language in binary terms, with Arabic connoting a more local space and English marking a more international one, we must think of the ways in which space defines linguistic practices: For many, the computer and the Web impose English as a de facto idiom of conversation; for others, sex as a topic of conversation imposes English as the lingua franca.

Besides being determined by education in foreign languages, exposure to Western media, and socioeconomic background, the use of English instead of or with Arabic can be attributed to the fact that many words are much more accessible in English, particularly in the terminology of sex. Some terms simply do not exist or do not widely circulate in Arabic (e.g., *S/M*, *drag*), even if that which they signify does exist in Arab societies. And some terms are too derogatory, which may explain the entry into Lebanese Arabic of the words *gay* and *lesbian* as an attempt to move away from the stigma that terms like *shadh*, *mkhannath*, and *louti* carry. As Najmabadi (2008) argues in the case of what she calls "Englishisms" in Iran, "to the extent that the adoption of the terms gay and lesbian into Persian nomenclature can be viewed as some sort of mimicry, it is a strategic move to shed the cultural stigma" (p. 40) of local words. Moreover, whether these language moves work or fail, she continues, is not determined by "the cultural power domination by a presumed 'gay international' that is exporting its identity categories in imperial fashion" (p. 40).

The Dilemma of Writing

I started this essay by asking how, as scholars, we should write about minor intimacies. Another question that emerges is whether we should write about them at all. Massad (2007) believes that academic writing contributes to the proliferation of discourse on Arab "homosexuals." He writes in the preface to *Desiring Arabs*: "When I chose the scholarly route, I came to understand identities as discursive effects, and therefore opted not to publish anything about the subject in order not to contribute to the problem by inciting more discourse about it" (p. ix). But what becomes of resistance in Massad's Foucauldian understanding of an all-encompassing, discursive power? Said (1983) critiqued the disturbing circularity of Foucault's theory of power: "In human history there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible" (pp. 246–247). For Said, resistances to disciplinary orders cannot be "silently absorbable into micronetworks of power" (2003, p. 245). The discourse on Arab sexuality by a critical scholar like Massad and by Arab queer activists is *not* equal to orientalist accounts and travel memoirs. The self-identification of queers with certain categories is not the same as their regulatory categorization by

oppressive structures. As Helem founder Ghassan Makarem (2011) put it, by identifying with criminal identities,

> We criminalize ourselves and reject the crime at the same time. This brings about a dual nature of such expression. One is used by the state and the ruling class to criminalize a section of society. The other is that of resistance and rebellion against criminalization and oppression. (p. 101)

Intellectual and artistic contributions on the right to sexual difference in the Arab world should not be folded into discourses of power.

Finally, there is something inherently troubling in writing about one's culture in a foreign language. As academics, we are already in dialogue with a restricted circle of intellectuals. As Third World academics, how does our writing in English impact the dialogues we strive to have with our home societies? If academic writing, even as it is done in Western societies' mother tongues, is considered an esoteric language by many, accessible to the very few, what then becomes of our writing that does not speak in the tongue of the society it studies? These questions are part of broader dilemmas about how, where, and to whom we write. We often do it with a tightly defined scholarly audience in mind; we do it for journals, for tenure, and within institutional spaces that often restrict how we do it. In a recent interview, Jasbir Puar explained that the ideas she introduced in *Terrorist Assemblages* have resonated beyond the academy "even if the language is 'jargony' or too academic." Puar expressed her amazement "to witness the entrance of the concept homonationalism into the general lexicon of LGBTQ organizing in varying locations globally" (Greyser, 2012, p. 842). The travels of an academic buzzword, coined in a study focusing primarily on the United States, and its appropriation in and adaptation to different local contexts brings us back to translation. As Puar notes, we should seriously consider why academic texts get "taken up more broadly despite their purported impenetrability" (p. 842). However, we should also be proactive in letting our research travel beyond the confines of the academy and of its language. As scholars working on the Arab world, perhaps this also means thinking about diversifying our publishing venues, about writing in Arabic. In a recent polemic article, communication scholar Toby Miller (March 7, 2013) criticized the use of English as the sin qua non language in the academy. Miller argued that it is not enough to engage primary materials in other languages and that it is crucial to cite theoretical and analytical works done in these languages. Queering the mother tongue is then a double-enterprise, requiring an equally critical reflexivity about monolingualism in both our native and academic languages.

Conclusion

The unease with categories was initially exacerbated by academic confirmations that it was indeed inauthentic to talk about gays in Arabic. But there is nothing easy about inhabiting new identities in what is inevitably and irreversibly a postcolonial, globalized modernity. When it comes to matters of the intimate, to sex and gender—long considered the repository of cultural tradition, long treated as the boundary marker between "us" and "them," and vested with the symbolic power to resist the other—the unease is magnified, and felt in the microspaces of desire. How can one confidently inhabit or uphold categories that reek of the foreign in their very enunciation? How can one feel comfortable with categories

whose newness is constantly flaunted—by parents, scholars, religious establishments, intellectuals, and popular media—as a sign of their inauthenticity? Engagements with the global are not easy; they are fraught with estrangements and ruptures, but also with unexpected affinities and emergent collectivities. These frictions are perhaps most immediately felt in communication—in linguistic practices, in sounds, in sights, in sensations that are as strange as they are familiar.

As scholars we are enmeshed in the very frictions we study. Be it the languages we speak, the theories we use, or the canons we follow, they all attest to that. But our consciousness of the varying sources of knowledge should not become an epistemological hindrance. The categories we end up using remain only one index of the complex experiences we investigate. A lesbian, or queer, or gay person is not only, and not always, that. While not all aspects of their lived experiences can be understood through these identity categories, these are no less significant for being partial, nor less authentic for being translated. This is not to argue that the translation and diffusion of Euro-American sexualities—categories, practices, identities—is an inherently liberatory enterprise. Rather, this essay's main claim is that the relationship between the visceral and the discursive should be theorized without resorting to binary understandings of English/Arabic, foreign/local, experience/language, authentic/translated. A commitment to recognize the fluidity of sex must come with an equal commitment to theorize the fluidity of language.

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