

IN/VISIBILITY OF LGBTQ PEOPLE IN THE ARAB SPRING: MAKING LGBTQ VOICES HEARD

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Abstract. LGBTQ use of the internet is a growing area of study. However most studies focus mainly on the US and the UK, and none pays much (if any) attention to the experience of LGBTQ people in countries where it is illegal to be LGBTQ. The events of the Arab Spring, significantly, signal the possibility that change may be possible in these countries, yet there seems to be little material on what LGBTQ people in these countries are actually thinking, doing, etc, and in particular what role the internet may be playing in this. This is a research-in-progress paper introducing a project which sets out to make a contribution on these lines, by making their voices heard.

1. Introduction: Homosexuality and the Law

In Western countries in contemporary culture, there are a host of different webspaces where LGBTQ people are able to meet, socialise, hook up, and share information and experiences. LGBTQ use of the internet is a growing area of study, too, with three recent books on the subject, (O'Riordan & Phillips, 2007; Pullen & Cooper, 2010; Mowlabocus, 2010) and numerous journal articles and book chapters (Light, 2008; Kreps, 2012). However, these writings focus mainly on the US and the UK, and none pays much (if any) attention to the experience of LGBTQ people in countries where it is illegal to be/do anything but heterosexual. At the United Nations, in March 2011, 85 of the United Nations' 192 member countries sponsored a new version of the declaration first proposed in 2008, recognizing LGBTQ rights (Jordans, 2011), and followed it up with a report published in December 2011 documenting violations of the rights of LGBTQ people around the world, including hate crime, criminalization of homosexuality, and discrimination. Nonetheless, in many countries in the early 21st century – including those who in 2008 made a joint statement opposing the proposed declaration - the legal status of LGBTQ people is still extremely challenging. With the notable exception of Israel, Turkey, Jordan, (the new) Iraq and the West Bank (in the Palestinian Occupied Territories,) same-sex activity is illegal throughout the Middle East and North Africa. In most countries in this region there is no recognition of same-sex relationships or same-sex marriage; there is no legal route to same-sex adoption; gays are not allowed to serve openly in military; there are no anti-discrimination laws

covering sexual orientation, or laws concerning gender identity/expression. In the Sudan, Somalia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, homosexuality is punishable by the death penalty (Bruce-Jones & Itaborahy, 2011). LGBTQ people are to all intents and purposes invisible in public spaces in these countries. The internet, however, and in particular webspaces specifically geared toward Arab LGBTQ people, do exist, where they may be visible to each other, if not to the wider population. These webspaces, however, are few, mostly amateur in design and implementation compared to slick Western equivalents, and rarely based in the countries themselves. Global sites lack the regional specificity and reinforce Western 'typing'.

The events of the Arab Spring, however, signal the possibility that change may be possible in some of these countries. What LGBTQ people in these countries are actually thinking, doing, etc, and in particular what role the internet may be playing in this, seems thus far, however, little commented upon. This research-in-progress paper consists in preliminary notes and positions on a project which sets out to make a contribution on these lines. Of all the countries in the Middle East, these issues are the most complex in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and this research project, in seeking to bring these issues to a wider audience, begins by, in the first instance, seeking to make the voices of Palestinian LGBTQ individuals heard. As the authors of the 2011 ILGA Report enthuse, "the so-called Arab Spring gives reason to hope for significant changes in the legislation of many countries in the Middle East and North Africa in a not too distant future" (Bruce-Jones & Itaborahy, 2011).

The paper begins with a background to the legal situation of LGBTQ people in the Middle East and North Africa in general, and Foucault's history of how sexual identities were characterised in Victorian Britain and its colonies. This includes a section on the legal position of LGBTQ in Muslim countries in the present day, and a short section on Foucault's own experience of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. The research project in Palestine is then outlined, briefly, before considering the notion in Western Philosophy of the 'Other,' in relation to these issues, and a potential way forward through use of the understanding of the Other offered by French philosopher, Levinas. The final section reviews use of the internet by the LGBTQ people in the region and the relative invisibility of these LGBTQ issues in Western media – apart from when it suits their other, less palatable agendas.

2. Background

2.1. BRITISH CHRISTIAN AND VICTORIAN COLONIAL LEGACY

More than half of the countries where homosexuality is still illegal "have these laws because they once were British colonies." (Gupta, 2008, 5). "Colonial legislators and jurists introduced such laws, with no debates or 'cultural consultations,' to support colonial control," Gupta tells us in his excellent recent report for Human Rights Watch. "They believed laws could inculcate European morality into resistant masses. They brought in the legislation, in fact, because they thought 'native' cultures did not punish 'perverse' sex enough." This was, indeed, not so much a 'Western' as a peculiarly Victorian export. As Foucault begins in his celebrated *History of Sexuality*, "At the

beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common... Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century.” (Foucault, 1990a, 3)

Later, Victorian values of prudery gradually changed the British Christian laws against sodomy (first introduced by Henry VIII in 1533, and a capital offence until 1861) into laws against a type of person – the homosexual. The term ‘homosexual’ was first coined by Hungarian sexologist Kertbeny (1869). This notion was taken up by Westphal in a famous article in 1870 as, “contrary sexual sensations” - regarded by Foucault as the “date of birth” of the categorisation, ‘homosexual’ (Foucault, 1990a). An 1895 translation of Richard von Kraft-Ebing’s sexologists’ bible *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) saw the word’s first appearance in English (Halperin, 1990).

While this change was underway, however, as early as 1860 in India, laws against sodomy were simultaneously exported to the colonies. Clearly, “the colonized needed compulsory re-education in sexual mores.” (Gupta, 2008, 5). Foucault’s main argument, that the ‘repression’ of sexuality in the late 19th century, and its restriction to the ‘parents’ bedroom’, represented, in fact, not a suppression but a veritable explosion of discourse around the subject, created, he argues, through their very prohibition, sexual ‘identities’ which we now take for granted in the West, and for many of which political campaigns have now been fought, and won, granting legal rights and protections. These ‘identities’ moreover, with their brand new sexological terminology, conglomerated sexual acts which, albeit often frowned upon, had been enjoyed by all and sundry from time immemorial, into human ‘types,’ whereby committing particular acts became defining of who one is in a way not seen before in history (Foucault, 1990a).

Despite the contemporary experience of gay, lesbian and other non-heterosexual identities, in the West, this characterisation of such identities rings all the truer when the ‘sexualities’ of individuals in non-Western, non-modern, countries comes into focus. Today, in Western countries, the Victorian ‘types’ are taken for granted, and teenagers discovering their ‘preferences’ are quickly socialised in one direction or another towards self-identifying according to the established schema. Debate around whether consumerism has played a particularly constructive part in this story – at least in the late 20th century (Sinfield, 1988; Green, 2002) - continues amongst academics devoted to this field. On the web, indeed, where Western LGBTQ people often meet, it seems likely that the ‘commodification of difference’ (Light et al., 2008) contributes to establishing such ‘types,’ in line with market segmentation practice, and that such practices reinforce and continue to spread, globally, the ‘identities’ created by Victorian values (Kreps, 2012). Nonetheless, it remains true that in non-Western countries, very different social and cultural settlements around the concept of sexuality continue to make themselves apparent – for example in South America (Fernandez, 1997; Peinado et al., 2007) and in the Arab world.

So in the 21st century we see “sodomy laws throughout Asia and sub-Saharan Africa have consistently been colonial impositions,” (Gupta, 2008, 10) and do not reflect pre-colonial cultural mores. Such laws are, as Gupta titles his treatise, an ‘Alien Legacy’. “No ‘native’ ever participated in their making. Colonizers saw indigenous cultures as sexually corrupt. A bent toward homosexuality supposedly formed part of

their corruption. Where pre-colonial peoples had been permissive, sodomy laws would cure them—and defend their new, white masters against moral contagion.” (Gupta, 2008, 10).

2.2. HOMOSEXUALITY IN MUSLIM COUNTRIES

Both major modern patriarchal religions (Christianity and Islam) share a focus upon procreation as the only legitimate reason to have sex. Yet until relatively recent times a pragmatic permissiveness seems to have held sway, in law, and perhaps, despite changes in the law, in fact in practice still persists. Not only the legacy of British Empire, but also the recent more fundamentalist interpretations of Islam have been responsible for a hardening of official and social attitudes against non-conforming sexual behaviour in Muslim countries. This is a little discussed topic. As Whittaker, former Middle East editor of the *Guardian*, describes in his ground-breaking 2006 book, *Unspeakable Love: Gay & Lesbian Life in the Middle East*, updated and expanded in 2011, and including much “face-to-face research... in Egypt and Lebanon,” this is “a subject that Arabs, even reform-minded Arabs, were generally reluctant to discuss. If mentioned at all, it was treated as a subject for ribald laughter or (more often) as a foul, unnatural, repulsive, un-Islamic, Western perversion.” (Whittaker, 2011, 11).

For some insight into the hardening, during the 20th century, of official attitudes, we need only to look to the implementation, in Muslim countries, of Sharia Law. Although Sharia law is supposed to be God’s law, there are wide variations in what it is supposed to entail. While only a few countries have state-level Sharia law, many others mix it with other systems, some at state, some at regional level. Turning, briefly, to sub-Saharan Africa, and an excellent report on the impact of the introduction of Sharia Law for Muslims in Nigeria in 1960 in various northern states, we discover, “In Islam, sexual intercourse is lawful only if it takes place between a man and a woman who are married validly according to law” (Ostien & Umaru, 2007, 44) – again, Foucault’s ‘parent’s bedroom’. There are a number of clauses in these laws against what are termed ‘unnatural’ sexual practices. Unlike in the West, there is no generally accepted equivalent of the word ‘gay’ in Arabic, and there is no direct mention of such sexuality – certainly in Nigeria’s Sharia laws. According to Whittaker, “the term *al-mithliyya al-jinsiyya*, literally ‘sexual same-ness’ has become used recently by serious newspapers and academic articles”, (Whittaker, 2011, 16) Popular media, however, continue to use the pejorative term, *shaadh* (‘queer’, ‘pervert’, ‘deviant’).

As the authors of the report on Nigeria point out, however, “It would be interesting to know whether anyone has ever been prosecuted under these sections of the Penal Code, and if so, for what ‘unnatural and indecent offences’ in particular. There are in fact communities of gays and lesbians in the larger Northern cities, those in Kano being the most famous. Whether, before Sharia implementation, they ever got in trouble with the law, is unknown to us. As we shall see below, even after Sharia implementation they apparently continue to thrive.” (Ostien & Umaru, 2007, 50) Importantly, however, although since 1960, “in the Sharia States the punishments at least for homosexual sex acts have gone up: *rajm* [stoning to death] for sodomy in most places; *rajm* for lesbianism in Kano and Katsina, the saving grace, again, is the

impossible standard of proof (barring confession). Judging from the recent news, the new laws do not seem to have suppressed the gays and lesbians:

Nigeria transvestite handed fine. A Nigerian Islamic court has sentenced a man to six months in prison and fined him \$38 for living as a woman for seven years in the northern city of Kano. The judge told 19-year-old Abubakar Hamza, who used his female identity to sell aphrodisiacs, to desist from “immoral behaviour”. Mr. Hamza, who appeared in court dressed in a pink kaftan and matching cap, said he was now “a reformed man”. (Ostien & Umaru, 2007, 54).

Whittaker, too, in his study of Arab countries, finds this curious mismatch between official attitudes and real life. “Evidence of previous tolerance can be found in Arabic literary works, in the accounts of early travellers and the examples of Europeans who settled in Arab countries to escape sexual persecution at home. Despite the more hostile moral climate today, however, same-sex activity continues largely undeterred.” (Whittaker, 2011, 11). It seems that, “as with many other things that are forbidden in Arab society, appearances are what count; so long as everyone can pretend that it doesn’t happen, there is no need to do anything to stop it.” (Whittaker, 2011, 11).

Obviously this is hardly a happy state of affairs for those who must live a life of secrecy, fearing exposure and blackmail, and face unwanted marriages, no redress in law against discrimination, and no support from health services for their particular needs. Most Arabs who engage in same-sex activities, indeed, in Whittaker’s experience, do not identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. As with Western societies prior to the Victorian sexologists, (Foucault, 1990a; 1990b; 1992) Arab societies are more concerned with sexual acts than orientations. Arguably, the Western experience in the last 150yrs of creating sexual identities and politicising the personal has created a space in which same-sex activity can take a place in the wider society that is recognised, protected in law from religious and ‘moral’ discrimination, and proud to speak its name. In the Arab world, where sexuality remains more fluid, in similar fashion to the Medieval West, only one ‘orientation’ – the ‘moral’ ideal of patriarchal male and his submissive female counterpart – is recognised, and the law seeks to prohibit sexual acts which fall outside of this ideal.

The vast majority of global websites for the LGBTQ community, however, play quite a prescriptive role in defining the Self. When creating an online profile on one of these sexual social networking sites, along with providing information about one’s physical appearance, demographic characteristics, personality traits, etc, one must tick a box declaring one’s sexual identity, and choose from among a specific (and arguably limiting) set of sexual preferences. Such data, moreover, beyond free text boxes for self-description, is often collected in a multiple-choice format, and then used as criteria to enable the website to offer matchmaking services, linking profiles with similar choices through a variety of search mechanisms. The requirements of the matching criteria asked for by Gaydar, for example, are arguably constitutive of specific – and Western - sexual identities. As Light et al. (2008) point out, “Not surprisingly we find dominant cultural stereotypes reproduced and reinforced through technological design...Although the free text element implies freedom to define oneself as one

chooses, the presence of menus and tick boxes shapes a pre-defined notion of what may or may not be an acceptable expression of identity.” (Light et al., 2008, 307) Making such choices at the outset, when creating one’s profile, may in fact have the effect of locking individuals into specific roles, prior to meeting, from which they are then unable to escape without admitting online dissimulation once face-to-face, at the risk of losing the connection as soon as it is made. Importantly, though, “the greater level of anonymity provided by the internet, as compared to face-to-face encounters, allows individuals to present aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would not ordinarily present to other members of society.” (Yurchisin, 2005, 737). In other words, the options may enable individuals to ‘role’-play at being one of the pre-defined ‘types,’ online, despite reservations regarding such behaviour offline. Anonymity, too, seems likely to be of greater significance to LGBTQ individuals in Middle Eastern countries. Photography and video, used extensively in the West, seem largely absent on the profiles of, for example, those Arabs who have ticked the check-box ‘Single Gay Man,’ to create a profile on one of the most popular global gay male websites, Gaydar.com. A cursory search for residents of Bethlehem, in the Palestinian West Bank, on Gaydar, returns 13 profiles of which only two have photographs.

2.3. FOUCAULT AND THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION

The rise of fundamentalist Islam has had a strong impact upon the lives of North African and Middle Eastern LGBTQ people. Looking again beyond Arabic society, to the Islamic Republic of Iran – where state-level Sharia applies - there is an instructive story concerning the very thinker who gave us our understanding of Western sexual identities: Michel Foucault. In 1978-79, Foucault became embroiled in the real-world events of the Iranian revolution. “Progressive and leftist intellectuals around the world,” Afary and Anderson tell us in their excellent guide to these events, “supported the overthrow of the shah... [but were] less enthusiastic about the notion of an Islamic Republic. A major exception to this ambivalence was Michel Foucault” (Afary & Anderson, 2005, 2). Foucault visited Iran during this period on a number of occasions, had private meetings with some of the key political and clerical players – including Ayatollah Khomeini – and wrote a string of articles for the Italian broadsheet, *Corriere della sera*. Foucault seemed blind to the patriarchal, authoritarian history of the extreme interpretation of shi’ism that had been developing over the course of the 20th century in Iran - a reactionary force at every turn of its modern history. They actively opposed the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, which made several egalitarian moves; they vehemently opposed the Ataturk-style secularisation of Reza Shah’s regime in the 1930s – especially the banning of the veil; and they opposed every step of the gradual increase in women’s political rights during the 1940s and 1950s. A major factor in the Shi’ite opposition to the Shah’s White Revolution in 1963 was the granting of suffrage to women. All these gender reforms were characterised by the Shi’ite clergy as “nothing to do with true equality ..[but]...instead an example of Western imperialist influence” (Afary and Anderson, 2005, 74). Foucault’s gender blindness with regard to the Iranian revolution included the Shi’ite attitude to homosexuality. In 1998, sociologist Ehsan Naraghi, who had met Foucault during one of his visits to Iran, recalled a conversation he had had in an interview with the well known Iranian

journalist Ibrahim Nabavi, twenty years previously. Afary and Anderson quote the interview at length, but just the following snippet about a meeting with several devout Muslim revolutionaries is revealing enough:

“EHSAN NARAGHI: You know that Michel Foucault was a homosexual, and this issue had an important influence on his ideology and his thinking..... Foucault was very curious and very sensitive about the issue [of homosexuality], and suddenly he asked, “What would the position of Islam and this future Islamic government be toward those we call minorities?” My wife and the other two said, “In Islam, respect for minorities is required, and several religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrians may exist.” They did not understand the meaning of Foucault’s question, although I immediately understood what he meant. Foucault said, “I mean the attitude toward those whom society calls abnormal and such other things...” My wife realised what he was talking about.... She got up and brought a French translation of a Quranic verse, placed it in front of Michel Foucault, and said, “Execution!” Foucault was dumb-founded. He was upset and left that night.” (Afary and Anderson, 2005, 143)

Perhaps this was one of the first moments upon which Foucault’s understanding of what was really happening in Iran began to counter what he hoped was happening. Finally, as the true face of the revolution began to show itself, Foucault stopped writing articles, and fell silent – for the rest of his life – on the topic of the Iranian revolution.

One need only look to the very recent case in Derby in the UK, where three Muslims have been imprisoned under new laws against hate crime, for promoting the death sentence for gay men, to understand that radical fundamentalist Islam – the world over – remains adamantly anti-homosexual (Addley, 2012). Clearly, with Gupta, this author believes “Eliminating these [anti-gay] laws is a human rights obligation. It means freeing part of the population from violence and fear.” (Gupta, 2008, 12) Yet it is also clear that gay and lesbian communities continue to exist in North Africa and the Middle East, whether or not they self-identify or can indeed be categorised as such, and enjoy a level of acceptance and permissiveness in the wider communities which they inhabit. The research being undertaken, about which this paper constitutes some preliminary notes, seems so far to bear this out.

3. Research in Progress

3.1. PALESTINE

The author has contact with a British humanitarian aid-worker, who I will refer to as ‘James’, working particularly in Bethlehem. Bethlehem is in the West Bank, where same-sex activity has been legal, under the auspices of Jordanian law, since 1951, but where there is no recognition of gay or lesbian relationships, no same-sex marriage or adoption, no anti-discrimination laws covering sexual orientation, or laws concerning gender identity/expression (Bruce-Jones & Itaborahy, 2011). In the other part of the

Occupied Palestinian Territories, Gaza, male homosexuality remains illegal, punishable by up to 10 years in prison, but female homosexuality is legal. This is because in the Gaza Strip, the British Mandate Criminal Code Ordinance, No. 74, of 1936, remains in force and continues to outlaw same-sex acts between men, although lesbian women are not subjects of the code and their relations are thus, technically, not unlawful (Ottosson, 2010). Reportedly, a number of Palestinians self-identifying as gay men have been leaving the Occupied Palestinian Territories, seeking refuge in Israel, which has Western European style anti-discrimination laws and was a signatory to the March 2011 proposed UN resolution, (BBC, 2003; Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008) this, despite the fact that if discovered by the Israeli authorities they are likely to be detained and deported as a security threat. They cite in particular, however, rather than the old colonial laws, the fear of Islamic retribution at home (BBC, 2003; Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008; Whittaker, 2011). Despite extreme difficulties with Israeli law on the subject of asylum, however, (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008) it seems Palestinian gay men may finally be close to gaining legal protection in Israel (Harrison, 2008) (see also below).

The situation seems somewhat more relaxed in the West Bank. James, the Bethlehem based aid-worker, in email correspondence in January 2012, told me “I know some gays in Bethlehem, who quietly go about their lives and hang out. In truth, the majority of people don't mind and are neutral about it.” Asked if he could help with my research, James volunteered to bring an online questionnaire to the attention of the Bethlehem ‘gays’, and their responses will form the core material of the next paper in this research programme. As James says in his emails, “There was more openness in the 1960s-70s, when Arab socialism liberalised social mores, and women were more ‘liberated’ too, but the Islamist wave of the 1980s on, tightened things.” Interestingly, on the subject of permissiveness despite the legal situation, James affirms that “People have quietly-held personal views that are more liberal, while publicly cleaving to more conservative views - because of their transitional doubts and inner reviewing of Islamic moral codes.”

The two year research project aims to uncover a picture of how LGBTQ individuals in Arab and Middle Eastern countries make use of the internet and new-media in their lives, and what their hopes and fears of the ongoing Arab Spring may be. As the issue at stake is in/visibility, the methodology adopted will be interpretive, and grounded theory will be used in as reflexive a way as possible (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2006). Grounded theory is deemed appropriate for this project as it is, firstly, “useful where no previous theory” exists, second, and most importantly, “it incorporate[s] the complexities of context into the understanding of the phenomena. Third, [grounded theory methodology is] ... uniquely fitted to studying process and change.” (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2006, 457). All information acquired through the research will be collated into the popular research software tool, nVivo, and coded ‘on the fly’ as it is collated.

In the first instance, a pilot project is underway to create an online questionnaire and to invite LGBTQ individuals in Palestine, known to the British Aid worker, ‘James’, to complete it. The first individuals to complete the questionnaire should do so in October 2012. The pilot is being undertaken in Palestine firstly because this is where the primary initial contact to undertake research has been made, but secondly because Palestine presents the most complex set of circumstances the project is likely to

encounter in the Middle East and North Africa, combining the legacy of the British colonial era, religious intolerance, and an oppressive state machinery that, in the case of Palestine, is not merely funded and supported by the West, (as with many of the dictators threatened by the Arab Spring elsewhere in the region) but constitutes an occupying populace drawn from around the world. Whilst this confers upon Palestine a unique combination of circumstances, as a pilot for the wider research it allows the project the opportunity to encounter and develop appropriate responses to all the circumstances it is likely to encounter in one go. Much may be learnt in Palestine that is not generalisable to the wider region, yet also many issues in the wider region may in turn reflect what the situation in Palestine epitomises.

As the introduction to the questionnaire states, “I want to hear from you about your life, the things that are important to you, what it is like to live as an LGBTQ person in your country, and what your own experiences are of this. In particular I am interested in what part the internet may be playing in your life, and in your experience of the recent turbulence in the region.” The intention is to collate the responses to this initial questionnaire and derive a series of questions for a handful of one-to-one interviews, to be conducted over Skype. The hope is to thus approach a picture of how LGBTQ individuals in Palestine describe their own situation, what use of the internet and new media they are engaged in, and their hopes for the future. Following this initial pilot, it is hoped that a new online questionnaire can be created and opened up to the wider Middle East and North Africa. Eventually, during 2014, it is intended to create a website with the anonymised voices of LGBTQ people, in both English and Arabic, and to thereby make these voices heard.

3.2. GAY PALESTINIANS AND THE OTHER

These issues raise particular questions about the notion of the Other in Western Philosophy. The Other as a concept that is defining of the Self has quite a pedigree in Western thought, going back to Hegelian ideas of alienation and resolution, and Husserl’s notion of intersubjectivity. But it is the notion of the Other in post-colonial studies, in gender studies, and in the ideas of Emmanuel Levinas, that are of most interest in this context. In post-colonial studies, to use the term introduced by one of the founders of the field, the Palestinian academic, Edward Said, the unequal relationship between conqueror and conquered requires an ‘othering’ of the subordinate culture by the dominant empire, which facilitates exploitation, suppression, and the ill-treatment of peoples regarded as less human than the dominant power (Said, 2003). Palestinians, therefore, are arguably historic victims of two successive ‘otherings’ in the 20th century – first by the British Empire, and then by the Israeli state. This colonial relationship of course works both ways, in that, as Whittaker points out, “Cultural protectionism is one way of opposing Western policies.... and so exaggerated images of a licentious West, characterised in the popular imagination by female nudity and male homosexuality, are countered by invoking a supposedly traditional Arab morality.” (Whittaker, 2011, 12)

In gender studies, the relationship between men and women is treated (e.g by de Beauvoir 1973) as a Self/Other dynamic, and the ‘othering’ of women by men a source of patriarchal dominance. Similarly, in the work of Judith Butler and others (Butler, 1990; 1993) one can find an understanding of homophobia described as the ‘othering’

of homosexuality, revealing insecurity about their own masculinity in those for whom homophobia is experienced strongly. Anti-gay sentiment, in this reading, is not merely about people communicating their beliefs about the 'class' of gay people, but a means by which homophobes can distance themselves from this class and its social status. The creation of the 'types,' in Foucault's reading of Victorian sexology, is a classic case of gender 'othering,' whereby a heterosexual normality was created in opposition to – and domination over – a homosexual abnormality, simultaneously shutting off more fluid sexual behaviour for those for whom the acts associated with either 'typology' may have been an occasional indulgence alongside those which were otherwise a preference.

These issues of post-colonial and gender othering are brought starkly into focus by the phenomenon of Palestinian men-who-have-sex-with-men fleeing from the West Bank and Gaza into Israel, seeking asylum. Whittaker quotes reports suggesting up to 600 such cases exist (Whittaker, 2011, 41.) Victims of a double Othering, their flight from religious-inspired othering in the Occupied Territories is then confronted by the imperial othering of the Israeli authorities for whom their nationality means they are a terrorist threat and must be detained and deported back to the Occupied Territories. A very recent report on ten such cases going through the Israeli courts is extremely revealing of this double tension. As the authors report, "Their cases presented a series of unusual legal and practical problems. Although Israel has a nascent asylum system, Palestinians are excluded by virtue of their nationality from applying for asylum" (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008). Undertaking interviews with these individuals whilst they were in custody in Israel, the authors relate how "the interviewees reported that, from an early age, they knew that homosexuality would not be tolerated by their society" (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008, 9). "A, a young man in his twenties who was interviewed in 2003, told us: 'Gays have been persecuted in Gaza as far back as I can remember. Until 1993, militias of men with masked faces regularly attacked known gay men'" (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008, 9). Another interviewee told a harrowing story of the ill-treatment of gay men in the West Bank: "C, who grew up in a village in the West Bank, reported an incident in his village: 'When I was a teenager, I had sexual relations with other young men from the village. One of them, a young man called M., wasn't discreet enough and was suspected of being a gay by the villagers. Graffiti was sprayed against him in the village, and at one point he was caught by a local gang. They captured him, set him on fire, and told him it was a punishment for his sins, and a warning to others. He suffered severe burns, especially to his face'" (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008, 9).

The complexity of the double-othering for gay Palestinian men is highlighted by the testimony of another of these interviewees: "D, a twenty year old from the West Bank said: 'In Palestinian culture, being homosexual is not only a great offense on the part of the homosexual, but is also a disgrace to his entire family and an abomination against Islam. It is also viewed as an act against the Palestinian struggle for independence. Known homosexuals are presumed to be weak and to identify and collaborate with Israeli Jews'" (Kagan & Ben-Dor, 2008, 10). Whittaker, too, reports this suspicion of betrayal: "In the West Bank and Gaza, it is common knowledge that if you are homosexual you are necessarily a collaborator with Israel,' said Shaul Gonen, of the Israeli Society for the Protection of Personal Rights. Bassin Eid, of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, explained: 'In the Arab mindset, a person who has committed a moral offence is often assumed to be guilty of others, and it

radiates out to the family and community. As homosexuality is seen as a crime against nature, it is not hard to link it to collaboration – a crime against nation” (Whittaker, 2011, 41). The legal recognition and protections for LGBTQ people in Israel, “while bolstering Israel’s image as a liberal-democratic society, in the Arab countries... also add grist to the idea that homosexuality is a ‘foreign’ phenomenon” (Whittaker, 2011, 42). This bolstering of Israel’s image in the eyes of the West has come to be known as ‘pinkwashing.’

There seems, nonetheless, to be some hope on the horizon. Shortly after the publication of Kagan and Ben-Dor’s report, Reuters reported that one gay Palestinian man had gained the right to asylum in Israel, perhaps most significantly in order to live with his Israeli lover. (Harrison, 2008) The case spent a good while going through the courts, however. “The Israeli newspaper Yedioth Ahronoth said on its website the Palestinian man had been asking for permission to live with his Israeli lover, a computer engineer in his 40s, for five years. They have been together for 8 years, the paper said.” (Harrison, 2008) It is hoped that the findings of the research currently underway by the author of this paper will add weight to the statement included in this report by “one rights group working with Palestinian gays... [that] there had been few reports of physical violence in recent years.” Gay men in Bethlehem, perhaps, may enjoy a more traditional, permissive, inclusive tolerance than the forthright othering evidenced above. What seems apparent, at least in translation, from these legal cases, however, is that men-who-have-sex-with-men who flee the Palestinian Occupied Territories seeking asylum in Israel, self-identify as ‘gay’ men, in keeping with the Western typology.

3.3. A WAY FORWARD

How is such othering to be overcome, particularly in such complex circumstances as those experienced by Palestinian men-who-have-sex-with-men? Certainly not in the short-term, one would imagine. Yet in the medium term the work of Lithuanian-born Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar, Emmanuel Levinas, (who was based in Paris for much of his life, and wrote in French) might have bearing in Israel at least, toward promoting a more tolerant and enlightened asylum system. What influence these ideas might bring to bear in Arab countries remains to be seen. Levinas’ contribution to Western Philosophy in the late 20th century derived from his experience of the holocaust, and a profound commitment to and defence – even in the hostile atmosphere of 1960s French discourse analysis and its pronouncements of the ‘death of the subject’ – of Humanism. For Levinas, the Other becomes an ethical *a priori*, ‘prior to any act’, superior or prior to the Self. The mere presence of the Other, confronting us as ‘face’ (Levinas, 2006) demands of us before any response a fundamental recognition of the limits of the Same. For Levinas, the Other is an ‘alterity’ that is beyond the ‘othered’ subordinates who, by our domination of them, are actually merely the other side of the coin of ourselves – those ‘others’ are actually part of what is Same, and the true ‘alterity,’ the real Other, once recognised, is the absolutely unknowable, true source of a humility that would prompt us to treat our ‘othered’ selves with far greater respect.

In this reading, where a quite transcendent and spiritual appreciation of an altogether more complete Other places ethics before metaphysics, we can perhaps

glimpse an argument that might hold sway with religious minded moralists in Muslim societies: an argument that stresses that wider reform and adoption of human rights, our responsibility to each other, must come before all other considerations. Whittaker's main argument is that "sexual rights are not only a basic element of human rights but should have an integral part in moves towards Arab reform, too. Open discussion of sexuality can also bring other reform-related issues into sharper focus." (Whittaker, 2011, 13). The main argument of this paper, too, then, would suggest that recognition of the 'othered' as a part of ourselves, and taking responsibility for them, presents an argument that could be instructive not just for LGBTQ experience in Muslim countries but for wider reforms in the Middle East and North Africa as a whole.

3.4. THE INTERNET AND GAY PALESTINIANS' IN/VISIBILITY

What role the internet might play in all of this also remains to be seen, but there are already signs that it is capable of having a profound effect. Those individuals self-identifying as LGBTQ people in Middle Eastern and North African countries already have recourse to a wide network of online forums based at GayEgypt.com. Unlike the glitzy, professional web design of Gaydar, GayEgypt.com and its main 'sister' web address, Marrakesh.net, present the rather 1990s, home-made aesthetic of the hobbyist. There are separate forums for each of a range of North African and Middle Eastern countries – including Palestine – and a News page that is packed with photographs and testimony of the events of the Arab Spring. Based in Bahrain and serving mostly the population of the Arabian Peninsula is the new social networking site, Ahwaa.org, which claims itself as the home of debate for LGBTQ issues in the region (LA Times). But news specific to the 'gay' experience is probably best sourced from the regional webzine, GayMiddleEast.com which includes thoughtful – and often rather academic – articles as well as up-to-the-minute news reports. Principal among the online resources for self-identifying LGBTQ Palestinians, however, seems to be AlQaws.org, perhaps the most professional looking of all the websites this author has seen in the region. Their 'About' page begins with the following statement: "alQaws for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society is a group of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning and queer (LGBTQ) Palestinian activists who work collaboratively to break down gendered and hetero-normative barriers. alQaws seeks to create an open space for all its members so that they may be engaged and energized in the struggle for equality and inclusion." The inclusion of the 'Q' – questioning and queer – with the LGBT is perhaps of particular importance in this context, given the comments above about identities, and would seem to be drawn from the growing understanding, in the West, that the 'Q' is more common than might appear. Generally used as a label setting queer-identifying people apart from the lifestyles that typify mainstream LGBT communities in the West, it is also a term that challenges the Victorian ideologies that created the LGBT identities in the first place.

Members of this Palestinian community undertook a speaking tour of the United States recently, prompting a response on Facebook from no less a luminary than Judith Butler. In her message, she picks out some of the most salient points touched upon in this paper: "As you doubtless know, many people in the LGBTQ community in the United States remain relatively ignorant about the conditions of Occupation. Your joint

presentations made clear what the daily confrontation with Israeli military power is like, how difficult mobility is, and how important it is that any queer activism commit itself to the struggle against the Occupation - an insupportable subjugation of the Palestinian people that clearly abrogates international law and the basic precepts of equality and justice. Indeed, you made perfectly clear why allying with groups that are not clearly and actively opposed to the Occupation is impossible. At the same time, you showed us how absolutely important it is to struggle for greater freedoms for sexual minorities in Palestine at every level of society, including the movements that are resisting the Occupation and calling for Boycott, Sanctions, and Divestment. In this time when Israel is actively engaged in "pinkwashing", that is, advertising its ostensible tolerance for gays and lesbians as a way of deflecting from the illegal and unconscionable subjugation of over two million Palestinians. It is quite monstrous that they seek to use us - gay, lesbian, queer, trans - in order to cast themselves as the beacon of democracy in that region, if democracy implies the equal treatment of the inhabitants of the land, regardless of nationality, origin, religion, race, and ethnicity!" (Butler, 2011).

3.5. ARAB SPRING

Alongside the continuing struggle of the Palestinians, however, in other countries in the region 2011 saw substantial and fundamental change, in response to unprecedented popular upheavals. Yet some of the signs for LGBTQ equality and inclusion are not, thus far, particularly hopeful. Despite hopes to the contrary, in Tunisia, arguably the country most advanced along the route of the Arab Spring, things are really not looking good for LGBTQ legal status. Speaking to TV presenter Samir El-Wafi, described as 'homophobic' by regional gay news website gaymiddleeast.com, Tunisia's new Human Rights Minister Samir Dilou attacked Tunisian 'Gayday' webzine and agreed "gays need 'medical treatment.'" (Littauer, 2012) Yet the existence of Gayday, launched in Tunisia in March 2011, is itself a sign that Western sexual identities are increasingly recognized in Arab countries and that young Arabs are seeking legal freedoms to adopt and live them (Gayday, 2012).

So far, the vast majority of what has been discussed in this paper has been largely invisible in the Western media. Yet one story - of a lesbian blogger in Syria - captured the Western press in June 2011, and catapulted the issue of LGBTQ equality in Arab countries to the centre of the debate. It turned out to be quite a storm in a teacup, however, and very revealing of the Western media's sensibilities. The 'lesbian blogger in Syria' turned out to be male, and American, and writing from the comfort of his desk in Scotland. One can come to many conclusions about what the story of 'Amina,' the 'gay girl in Damascus,' actually means. Her posts, and the CNN article (Davies, 2011) about gay rights in the Arab world which brought her blog to the world's attention, seem to be concerned about the fate of LGBTQ people under would-be Arab democracies. The implication of this focus, however, seems to be that LGBTQ people "have fared better under Arab authoritarianism and that, given a choice, would prefer to be under a regime that oppresses them politically but "allows" for a minimum of sexual freedom rather than be under a [religious] government that grants them political rights and might be more socially conservative" (Mikdashi, 2011). As the LA Times put it, "While the media kerfuffle continues over the fake Syrian lesbian blogger... gays and

lesbians in the Middle East are struggling daily to make their voices heard” (LA Times, 2011). The otherwise highly respected Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – founded in 1910 - who created an ‘Arab Spring’ tracker website in April 2011 to monitor developments across the region, unfortunately produces not a single return on a search for ‘gay’ or ‘lgbt’ (Carnegie, 2012).

4. Conclusion

This research-in-progress paper, therefore, although it must await the results of the research before any firm conclusion, finds that the concerns of LGBTQ people in the Middle East and North Africa are historically complex, caught as they are at the nexus of colonial ‘othering’ as well as religious and moral ‘othering’ by both Christian and Islamic hetero-normativity, and that – perhaps unsurprisingly – this ‘othering’ is at its most complex and difficult in the Palestinian Occupied Territories, where the pilot for the research will take place. It is also clear that these issues, aside from some academic interest, remain largely invisible in Western media and political circles, beyond ‘pinkwashing’ attempts by Israeli commentators keen to show their liberalism in comparison to their neighbours, and the widespread Western insecurity in response to the Arab Spring that prompts fears that LGBTQ people might fare worse under Arab democracies than they did under dictatorships.

Yet the anecdotal evidence thus far seems to suggest that the legal status of LGBTQ people in these countries – often simply a colonial legacy no-one has yet seen fit to remove from the statute book – and the often noisy pronouncements of religious bigotry, belie a tolerance within the wider community – (or at least anecdotally in Bethlehem, and by inference from events on the web in parts of Tunisia) that is pragmatic, historic, and – arguably – ongoing. The hope for widespread reform that includes the legal rights and protections enjoyed by LGBTQ people in the West, in the final analysis, will depend, in a newly democratic context in Arab states, on that very tolerance.

The results of the research being undertaken in this project, bringing the voices of those directly affected into the open, promise to be especially revealing in this respect. The role played by the burgeoning number of online resources for self-identifying LGBTQ Arab individuals in the region, and the eventual augmentation of these with the project’s own website, portraying a snapshot of (anonymised) LGBTQ voices for a more global audience, promise to make this an interesting and important research project.

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