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An interview by Hoda El Shakry

An Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, Gil Hochberg received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work focuses on the intersections of trauma studies, psychoanalysis, race theory, and postcolonial theory, particularly in the context of contemporary Israel and Palestine as well as North Africa. Professor Hochberg has published essays on a wide range of issues including Francophone North African literature, Palestinian literature, gender and nationalism, and cultural memory and immigration, as well as exile and literary production. Her first book, *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (Princeton University Press, 2007), examines the complex relationship between the signifiers “Arab” and “Jew” in contemporary

Jewish and Arab literatures. She recently talked with Hoda El Shakry, a doctoral student in Department of the Comparative Literature at UCLA, about her current projects, including a special issue of *GLQ: Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*.

On May 12, Professor Hochberg will appear at CSW's Works in Progress II, a multidisciplinary symposium featuring recipients of CSW Faculty Development Grants. For more info, visit our website.

Can you tell us a little about the special issue that you are organizing for GLQ?

The special issue is tentatively called “Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine.” It came about through several conversations I had with a number of individuals regarding the need to regenerate an explicitly political discourse in the realm of Queer Studies.

Palestine has come to represent, for many of us, the center of a very complex political situation that one ought to address in one way or another in order to be ‘political.’ It became apparent to me that, with respect to Palestine, there is an unquestionably heterocentric and heteronormative agenda in nearly every attempt to address the situation, regardless of the political stakes.

In large part, the most telling event that propelled this issue happened a few years ago. There was an event at UCLA during which a famous Israeli anti-Zionist historian came to speak about the horrible conditions in Gaza and the West Bank. When we entered the lecture hall, there were these pamphlets on the seats that valorized Israel's advancement with respects to gay rights, and it struck me as odd that these were there. I later discovered that these pamphlets were

placed there by a number of individuals in attendance that identified themselves as queer Jews. Towards the end of the talk, one of these individuals addressed the speaker and asked: “Given Israel's record for protecting gay rights, how do you account for the fears by Israeli gays for a one-state solution?” The speaker responded by saying that he was more concerned with protecting the lives of Palestinian children than with the rights of gay men to have sex. The reaction to his response was extremely celebratory and included applause and cheers, and a rather clear moment when the queer man was very publicly shamed.

At the time, this exchange made me very uncomfortable, and it took me a while to analyze the nature of this discomfort. Of course, it is unquestionable that we all think that the lives of children are more important

than the sex life of any man or woman—gay or straight. But something about the answer, both its performance and its reception, caused a certain shift in the power dynamic. So while the question may have come from a provocative or even antagonist place that represented Israel as the liberal state and Palestine as homophobic, the response created a situation where suddenly the power dynamic was mapped very differently onto the heterosexual man. In his response, the speaker essentially ‘outed’ himself, stating: “Well maybe as a heterosexual man, this doesn’t seem to be so important for me.” The heterosexual man therefore presented himself as the one capable of thinking “straight.” He was the one who could see that the lives of children are more important than sex, while the man’s question was framed as simply a concern about who he could have sex with. At that moment, queer politics was trivialized as a mere sexual issue in opposition to “real” politics.

What I am hoping that this special issue of GLQ will do is to dare to look at this very uncomfortable meeting between “queer” politics and “real” politics. I am trying to see if we can come up with some meeting points, questions and answers, in a way that complicates the question without recirculating centers of power in an either racist or heterosexist way. I really believe that there

is a way that you can successfully be aware of various forms of discrimination and how they interact without being either racist or heterosexist.

How does this project fit in to your work more broadly speaking?

Initially I wasn’t sure if I wanted to do an edited volume on the issue or work on it myself. I even thought of the project as a potential second book. It became clear to me pretty early on that I wanted to do a work strongly invested in forms of representation and political activism that included multiple points of views, voices, and sites of encounters. I believed that working with different writers from different locations would be the most politically and discursively productive. In the process, I tried very hard to include diverse voices, despite encountering a number of challenges in this vein. The recent tragic events in Gaza certainly didn’t make things easier. The fact that certain people are actually under fire really affects the writing of each of the pieces and what it is possible to include and what it is not, in a way that doesn’t exist in many other contexts.

This work is bringing me back to the issues of sexuality and gender that used to be very central to my work. My earlier publications were more focused on questions of gender and sexuality, mostly in the context of femi-

nism and nationalism. As I was working on my first book, it was very difficult to accommodate everything. I was working on questions of partition and separatism and quite consciously chose to evacuate the gender component, since at the time I felt it was the only way that I could make progress on the project. And so for me, this is mainly a return to what I see as in many respects, the most distracting mode of thinking. I believe that once sexuality and gender enter the equation, it shifts how we analyze various forms of power, counter-power, postcolonialism, Marxism, and globalism. Suddenly, all these theories that we employ to think about the distribution of power become very unsettled and messy and leave you uncomfortable, particularly with respects to the question of Palestine.

In American academia in particular, people are very uncomfortable making statements about their engagement with forms of power, despite their interest in analyzing and labeling various “good” and “bad” types of power. I am willing to delve into somewhat dangerous waters by asking difficult questions about this “good” and “bad” power: who and what it serves, and how these demarcations are made. Sometimes, in order to say something that matters and avoid recirculating the very same ideas about who is good and who is

bad, you simply can’t be concerned with being polite.

Your contributing essay to the collection is dedicated to the film-piece *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints* by the Palestinian visual artist Sharif Waked. How did you become interested in this project and where did you first encounter Sharif Waked’s film?

I first saw the piece a few years ago through a friend in London where it was showing at the time. Initially I did not see the entire film but only some of the stills, and I was immediately fascinated. I wrote an email to Waked himself and asked if I could get a copy of the film. He responded that he was putting together a book that would be a collection of essays based on the exhibition catalogue and sent me the film. I still think it is one of the most interesting pieces produced about the conflict in general, and more specifically, about representations of checkpoint.

What is the premise of the film?

Sharif Waked’s seven-minute film is titled *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints* and was released in 2003. The film is divided into two main parts: the first shows a colorful fashion show on “the latest in

checkpoint fashion” where the models—a mix of Palestinian and Israeli men—parade down a catwalk modeling clothes that have been modified for easy removal and visibility in the context of a checkpoint body search. The second part of the film shows a series of black and white archival images of Palestinian men at various Israeli checkpoints in different stages of being searched. In conjunction, the two segments of the film demonstrate both the daily violence and harassment of checkpoints in the context of the Palestinian body, as well as the complex nature of desire, sexuality, and gender in the context of the crisis.

What is the critical potential of Waked’s film, and how does it challenge the standard representations of the crisis as simply being about oppressors and the oppressed, colonizers and the colonized?

I think that the answer would have to be that the piece places desire in the center of its exploration. Certainly, the film complicates the binary of the oppressor and the oppressed, though one still has to be careful. It is very clear that there is a power inequality between armed and uniformed soldiers blocking the movement of unarmed Palestinians who need to pass through

these checkpoints in order to facilitate their mobility. That is very clear. The question that is more complicated, however, is whether in this distribution of power, there is a more productive way to read this both in terms of political activism and in terms of modes of representation, even in such a clear dichotomy. I think that at the risk of sounding optimistic or perhaps falling under accusations about an investment in subversive politics, it nevertheless is important to maintain the idea that politics really is about fine-tuning. To merely identify time and again where the source of power is and how omnipresent it is, simply isn’t productive. I don’t think that this empowers the disempowered (in this case those trying to cross the checkpoint), but even more so, I am talking about the community who ends up viewing these representations of the checkpoint: who they identify with and how they identify with them. If we are calling for the creation of some kind of community around representations, I think that a community that is organized only around a sense of injustice, subjugation, humiliation and victim-hood, then that is not a recipe for an empowered community.

In my reading of this piece, it clearly subverts common representations of, for example, Palestinian men as suffering from a so-called crisis of masculinity where they

are stripped of their manhood and humiliated in the face of these hyper-masculine soldiers. Therefore in addition to trying to say something critical about the mapping of a national conflict onto this masculinist narrative, I am also trying to say that one needs to move beyond speaking about these images of Palestinian man, or women more generally, as being in a position of complete subjection. And this can be done by actually allowing that body under the control of the gaze and scrutiny of the soldiers to be read as a teasing body, a seductive body, one that plays or toys with its own sexuality and forbidden desirability. What we need to read, in my opinion, is that its own being desired represents a form of empowerment. I do not mean empowering in the sense that it can “break down” the checkpoints, but rather empowering for the kind of community it builds among the viewers. These communities are empowered by irony and the ability to tackle this situation with language, an explicitly political language at that, that dares to bring sexual politics, indeed queer politics, in direct dialogue with anti-occupation and nationalist discourse and more specifically, in dialogue with a leading trope of nationalist discourse in the Israeli-Palestinian case, which is the myth of masculinity and the crisis thereof.

How in your opinion does “queer politics” (or more broadly speaking, an exploration of the relationship between structures of power and questions of gender and sexuality) open up new possibilities for representing the conflict in addition to challenging the very modes and politics of representation? In other words, what does it mean to “queer” the Palestinian question and why does it need to be “queered”?

Why “queer politics?” is probably one of the more difficult questions to answer, even if it seems like an obvious one. I actually debated for a long time whether or not “queer” politics was the right approach to take. It was mostly because of the objections to the term “queer” that I decided to keep it. I think “queer,” a term scholars have been trying to define since the 1990’s, is in use and circulating, and it comes with baggage of both potential and criticism. In this issue, I am trying to rid the term of some of this baggage, such as the accusation that it is a Western term mapped onto other contexts. But I believe that to attempt to evade that criticism by simply using other terms is really just a shortcut. Any attempts to try to do that within the position of the American academy are bound to reach their limits, since this is a term in circulation. To try to

see how this term could be used in different contexts and to complicate it is another thing entirely, which I do hope to achieve in this issue. I disagree that a term like this is untranslatable due to its western history. I also disagree with the message that this presents in terms of the neat divisions of the world into centers of various cultural interactions that are sealed off from one another; and if they have any impact at all, it is always the one-sided effect of the perpetually empowered west imposing itself on the east. It is a similar argument to my analysis of the meaning of power in the context of the checkpoints. I chose “queer” therefore because it is available, in circulation, and the dominant term, and we need to come to terms with it. We need to deal with it also in relation to Palestine as we do in many other contexts. I don’t think that there is a better term that moves productively between gender, sexuality, and other modes of existence and representation. “Queer” does allow that space from sexual orientation so to speak, that other terms do not, and it also lends itself to talking about the politics of representation in a manner that other terms do not.

For me, what it means to do a queer reading in the context of Palestine is first and foremost to foreground the conflict in sexuality, and to insist that sexuality and

the politics of sexuality are not secondary, that it is integrated with politics and is a part of the language of national politics as politics par excellence. So in some ways it is simply a means of undressing national politics to talk about what it really is. It is also to insist that not to queer the question of Palestine and its discourse, is not only to avoid bringing in sexuality, but more crucially, it is to continue to give credence to the heterosexist and homophobic frame that surrounds the entire discourse of the conflict. It is not a question of whether we are going to bring in sexuality or not. Rather, it is about whether we are going to continue to produce heterosexist discourse under the guise of some kind of naturalized heteronormative narrative about being more concerned with life than sex; or are we going to try to create a less violent discourse around this very violent conflict.

Like irony, humor seems to play a very central role in Waked’s video piece. In light of various critical conceptualizations of laughter and humor (such as Freud or Bakhtin), what is the political potential of humor in *Chic Point*?’

Humor is extremely effective in Waked’s film, particularly in the pairing of the fashion show and the archival images, and

the order of their representation. Of course, the archival images are in and of themselves certainly not funny. Even the suggestion that one would look at the archival photos in any context that is humorous is itself perverse. But there is something about that perversity that is very important to explore, precisely because it is so politically daring. The film pushes the boundaries by representing the archival photos as having tantalizing and pornographic potential. Such an image on its own (for example, of a naked and blindfolded man facing tanks and guns) might offer emotional catharsis, but as a political commentary it really doesn’t do much. What is interesting in Waked’s piece is the coupling of these archival images with campy fashion in a way that changes the very nature of these images. It is not a pairing one would normally expect, so I think it also says something very serious about humor. The piece essentially calls for a reconsideration of the central place of humor as an effective political instrument and means of building community; and not simply as a release, which is one of the more common representations of humor. The place of humor in a context that is explicitly not funny, and the perversity of this, is productive in re-presenting the division of power and nature of oppression such that we can see through the cracks, including

that manner in which power is distributed against the grain. It is therefore about alternative representations of existing forms of power and counter-power, as well as a call for us to look out for them, to embody them and to host them.

Hoda El Shakry is a doctoral student in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA. Her doctoral project explores the historical, clinical, anthropological, literary, and linguistic relationship of psychoanalysis to the region of North Africa often referred to as the Maghreb. Working in Arabic and French, her work seeks to genealogically read the intellectual history of psychoanalysis and psychiatry against the literary and ethnographic tradition of the Maghreb.