

# **Decolonizing Sexualities Network Meeting, 4-5 July 2013**

## **Day One**

### Opening Plenary

Some main points and threads that emerged were:

- How we must learn from feminism and not dismiss all as hegemonic/white feminism.
- Self-organised queer spaces that become a space of privilege for white women and white men can be seen to erase the need of feminism.
- Feminism is useful up to a certain point, and can be a productive phase
- Feminism is not just a word but is very much about actions and who we are, an embodied sense of the feminist.
- We are also faced with the challenges of heteronormativity - what are the problems and possibilities of queer families?
- There is a need to engage with history, to show what activism has happened and how that has informed current struggles. We also need to understand locations and relations through colonial legacies and histories.
- There are challenges in trying to meaningfully relate struggles through coalition, solidarity, alliance, and mobilisation. There are risks in transnational solidarity becoming a gesture; alliances may start out well but then become problematic. Coalitions must be informed by different positions. One challenge of this is how to build alliance without losing identity - how can political identity positions be useful?
- Interfaith coalitions are important.
- How do we resist/challenge the hegemony of white gay men in the 'struggle' - how to reclaim one's own struggle.
- The connections and separations between academia and activism - we should be questioning the theory/practice binary as a way of framing engagement, and be wary of the imposition of analytical terms. For example, 'homonationalism' is a very US specific term. This is not to say that nationalism isn't relevant in different contexts, but that it is relevant in different ways. There is a hegemony of the US in the circulation of terms.
- The trajectories of terms can be charted, such as the use of 'queer', which is at times useful and at times not.

- Religious identity informs political and personal sites. We need to be aware of religious oppression and religion privilege, as well as male privilege and white privilege.
- We must not foreground Islam in relation to fundamentalisms, and bear in mind Christian and Hindu fundamentalisms.
- It is important to consider the ethics of our work and to focus on justice. We must keep aware of our own complicity, as well as considering inter-species ethics
- Different struggles should be connected, such as anti-racist queer politics and critiques of settler colonialism. Possibilities of using queer postcolonial frameworks.
- There is a need to give an account of our relationships and to think of the sexual and the role of the sexual in struggles. This is often subordinated when in complex / violent situations

## Topics

### *Terminology: Queer, Homonationalism*

- It is important to recuperate 'queer' as first used by Chicana queers.
- Queer can be a way for young people to transgress the normative and broaden their sexual and gender experience. It can provide a space.
- There is US institutional clout, so far that the only term is queer, and so the term becomes international and elite. The terms lesbian of colour and queer of colour being used reflect a US inflected elite, as these terms are irrelevant to the grassroots in India and Pakistan, for example.
- The implications of this are that it is hard to even listen to what people are saying about their desires. Sexual identity gets constructed as a western model, hence rejecting anyone who claims a non-hetero identity as 'unauthentic' or complicit with Western imperialism.
- The political economy to the term of queer is ongoing. The use of queer in the Palestinian context is dismissed as elite, but there is also a homophobic straight usage that does not reflect on its meaning or politics.
- There is however validity in using 'queer' and 'person of colour' as elastic terms. Being aware of the US context doesn't preclude these terms being useful in different contexts.
- The idea that non-Western cultures 'do not have the words' for queer needs to be questioned because there are words but just not direct translations. Being

local is extremely important in order to recognise that there are ongoing struggles.

- There is perhaps a need to clarify when/why queer is used in different contexts. For example, queer was not used in Safra previously, as the organisation wanted to mark identity as a political group. There is now a shift from that with younger women who identify as queer. In this sense it is a generational issue.
- LOC specifically use 'lesbian of colour' to mark a political identity and to address invisibilising. In Paris, groups use pejorative terms (eg trans faggots and dykes) instead of using queer. Queer is used mostly by cis white men and cannot incorporate discussions of oppression of trans people in the medical establishment, for example.
- The 'cool factor' of queer makes it a way for younger people to transgress normative paradigms. This can become problematic as everyone is queer (all terms are at risk of being hijacked and appropriated).
- Queer is not only a term but is also a theory and these travel. Certain scholars are translated widely, and others are erased from history. We need to compile indigenous terms regarding gender and sexuality - in some countries there can be 10-15 terms. There also needs to be awareness and understanding of translation into Braille.
- We need to be critical of 'queer' but can't spend all our energy on this; we need to build our own agenda. Additionally we need to be wary of not dismissing all US ideas out of hand. Must also be wary of assuming that all queer/LGBT comes from the western model, as non-normative sexuality can be dismissed as western. We need to have own words but also use particular hegemonic words to make things relatable.
- Using of queer can be strategic and to address certain audiences, and they can be a shortcut. We need to think about register, and the use of words as rhetorical devices. We can experiment with terms, and can dance around with language. We do not need to get fixed on one term and always use it [we shouldn't reify terms that we use].
- The use of homonationalism can erase specific contexts. There are dozens of events that feature homonationalisms because it is a sexy term. Articulations of sexuality and race vary depending on where we are located - how you present yourself differently if in France (where there is homonationalism) or Guadeloupe (where there is homophobic nationalism).
- Women's rights were used as a justification for colonialism, and they are still being used (in Afghan conflict for example).

- Terms are co-opted by the media. Homonationalism is now used to term people trying to claim asylum in Europe. We can counteract this by using our own definitions and making these circulate.
- There is a political economy of publishing and funding - there are hindrances in getting different ideas are out there. Often this is linked to terminology - there are multiple conferences on 'homonationalism', but 'decolonising sexuality' is at the bottom of funding priorities.
- Terms are deeply problematic but it doesn't mean that we give up on them. There is the potential for terms to incorporate those things that they exclude.
- There is hegemony in the US in the circulation of certain terms. What is at stake in how queer of colour is being used - why use the US intellectual/activist terms?
- We also need to recognise the importance of grassroots organising and the terms that come out of there. We need to listen to what the grassroots use rather than impose ideas and terms from outside, so discussions are grounded in experience locally.
- We need to be wary of supposing that languages do not have terms as every language has its own terms that it develops when it needed them.
- There is a challenge here regarding how to negotiate rights discourse and the violence of language. We need a simultaneous critique of racism and critique of the oppression of women leveled through religion.
- Context matters for how terms are used - there is a need to think about how queer travels. `In the academy, it can travel via Foucault and Butler, but Latina scholars are erased.

### *Religion*

- We need to negotiate the tensions between religion, racism, gender and sexuality.
- What do we mean by religion - theology, belief, ritual, fundamentalisms? We need to think about what each of these are and not call all religion, and have care regarding terminology regarding the reality of lives and subjectivities.
- This is very different to the racialisation of what can be labeled as racialised others, and these are too often conflated within an activist context [an idea of meta religion].
- Many secular feminists [such as Joan Scott] didn't know how to grapple with the complexity of religion and separate this from racialisation. There is a binary being created here that we need to address so we can talk about

racialisation and fundamentalism, and address the circularity of secular feminism that tries to understand religion in particular binary ways.

- There is a problem with the public face of Islam. We need to be better at promoting everything we're doing. Conservatives are very good at getting their message across whether in academia or activism. We should use the media to show that there is a complexity to religion.
- There is a need to face our positionalities regardless of whether this is of privilege or not. There is an absence of commitment to addressing this with a sensitivity and graciousness when it is about something that we do not know, and perhaps cannot know due to our positionality. We have to consider the personal vulnerabilities.
- Is there a way of creating a non-religion that is secular, but distinct from 'western secularism'. Is there a way of making a space outside of religion.
- Can there be a non-theological engagement with theology. How to have a dialogue with [the] religious?
- These things do not have to be an either/or choice. You can cruise the religious and the non-religious as a continuum.
- Religion can be used as and when as a rhetorical device (by people in power). We are always in a religious space, whether we practice religion or not. We can pick and choose the rituals to practice.
- Comparing religion to gender, it is not so easy to cruise between gender and religion.
- However, in reality people do pick and choose and move in and out.

### *Desire and Sexuality*

- We are often told that sexuality must be subordinated to other struggles. Do we want to make the argument that the sexual is a fulcrum or central in argument? We need to pay heed to desire, and how desire is complicated by race and racialisation. Often, in discussions, we do not always account for the sexual.
- Straight women have to talk about who they sleep with all the time but it is not liberating for them, so is it always a productive thing to talk about sex and the sexual in a queer space [and as queers]?
- There is quite a vulnerability in the realm of desire - is this discussion more suited to poetry/music/art?
- The question remains, how do we decolonise desire, what does it mean to decolonise sexualities? The challenge is to consider what a critical vocabulary would mean.

- Where are we at in decolonising our own minds. Can we access these roots, and should we? How do we do this through language - does the decolonising mean connecting to a 'native' or 'mother' language that you have denied? Can we access a decolonial sexuality?
- Desire is political and has a political economy, it develops comes from both history and context - need to be historically materialist about desire; what do we hope to gain from discussions of desire?
- In Palestinian queer movements, for example, relationships with Israelis is not necessarily being about desire for Israelis. Power plays into the community in this way, but this is not positive unless we have a discussion about who we desire and a politics of desire.
- How might we adopt a rhetoric of race and racialisation so sex lives might be more complex.
- In the US movement there is a saying 'talk black sleep white', which is part of a political discussion. Desire becomes part of dealing with the psychic effects of racism
- This is not just bodily - there are elements of maintenance, mental health, and care that are within desires. But maybe this is something that doesn't need to be challenged.
- Desire is expressed in racialised terms.
- This needs to account for people who do not have sex with others; they do not disengage with the sexual but have chosen not to have sex with others.
- At a 10-day gathering of LOC, there was the need to be together and stay together and think through issues and make informal workshops of colour space. At the same time, some of LOC were in relationships with white lesbians. We decided to all stay together in the same place, but when going into organising the white lovers would be separated
- Trans gay men and bio [can be a preferable term to cis] gay men in organising space. Changed the trans victim insecurities as sad and shy and bio men as proud and confident. It can be helpful to have joint organising space.
- Inter-racial desire as complicated due colonial legacies where whiteness is what the colonised should desire. The desired other needs to recognise the institution of whiteness and have some commitment to dismantling this.
- An interracial relationship does not always involve white people.

- Desire can also be tied in with issues of shame and self hatred. There can be tensions among people of colour, and desire might be a way to get a handle on this.
- Internalised racism comes through in relationships
- The problem would not be due to going out with a white person, but due to going out with a racist.
- What about the function of sexual relationships with people with whom an emotional attachment won't be formed? This allows engagement with politics, and there is also a way to have sex.
- This is a different description of desire, desire not always separate from emotions. We need to have a political analysis of desire, but what about an ethics of desire? In principle is there such a thing as an ethics of desire - does justice enter the picture?
- For example, the ethics of food production and desire for food is interconnected. We need to work on developing an [intersubjective] ethics of desire.

## **Day Two**

### **Opening Plenary**

#### *Solidarity / Alliances*

- It is important to create our own platforms. Partnerships with other groups can be formed but this is often done through good personal relationships and having someone within another organisation who is willing to take a risk.
- Connections from the Safra Project were used for the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI). The media will emphasise some partnerships over others, for example IMI's connections with deaf communities and projects is not focused on. The IMI demonstrates the need for a broader coalition.
- Coalitions can also be strategic. For example, the enterprise 'Pink Dot' uses strategies and money from corporations such as Google. This could be seen as a form of pinkwashing but it also enables groups to become visible. There is a fine line between short term and long term agenda.
- The politics of separatist space is also a short-term agenda. It can be a practical tool to speak with people who have similar experience. but this needs to be a temporary space rather than a principle. We also need to be aware that pressures from the outside often explode in spaces that are meant to be safe.

- It is perhaps more productive to think about an identity of politics rather than a politics of identity. The Safra Project is about identity but alliances are political.
- Convenient alliances can be seen through the example of East End Gay Pride (organised by the EDL), where a very liberal group gathered to stop the march. The same people then organised their own pride in the East End, which they thought was fine because they weren't EDL, but they still didn't engage with the local community, they still wanted a large police presence and didn't understand that there was a problem with that.
- This second march appears more benign, but was just as pernicious. The march wanted police presence because the neighbourhood is expected to be homophobic.
- We need to be aware that mainstream Muslim LGBT groups can add to the problems.
- We need to move on from naive expectation that we have the same politics with those like us. Forge alliances with whom you share politics, and forget the others.
- In India there are other people doing work but the middle classes get funding. We should change what we think about as resistance - it is not always through large groups and NGOs but through local affinity groups that make people survive. People outside of metropolitan centres are rarely talked about.
- It is important for women-only or lesbian-only space to be trans inclusive. Certain events can become more trans inclusive through this being a condition of particular alliances.
- It is often more possible to work within anti-racist groups regarding gender/sexuality, rather than with gay/feminist groups regarding race.
- Sometimes it is about having patience - you have to break with people and do your own work, to then work with other groups later down the line. People are not always willing to take the risk of getting involved in the early stages, but are happy to jump on the bandwagon of your labour.
- It is important to hold on to non-negotiable conditions / principles.
- There needs to be a degree of self care here. We are often asked to prove solidarity or prove ourselves to groups, or asked to be involved with groups when the struggle that they are involved with will leave you oppressed. You can be pulled into and manipulated into other people's battles.
- There is strength in being in local communities because these are the people who are connected to you and invested in you. Some would rather put work



in there because this is family [rather than 'queer family']. It's not easy, and you often have to be persistent with this.

- The media uses examples of queers in particular contexts to provoke 'sympathy' from other queers, and then suddenly people get engaged with the situation in Gaza, for example, because a gay couple were killed there.
- Often it is a question of whether to stay and fight the fight, or leave for 'safety'.
- Different parts of oneself can feel safe in different places in the world, so it is not an either or situation. Exile can be a fluid state. You may have death threats from certain places but feel alive there.
- There is a migrant queer nostalgia that exists, where you might yearn for spaces where you felt safe. The global south not often thought about as a site for which you might yearn.
- There are abusive relationships between gay organisations and people seeking asylum from the global south. We need to challenge this. They are abusive on a sexual level, and people get embarrassed by the scenarios. This dynamic can be very much like a domestic violence and control scenario.
- We need to also find ways to offer support rather than just criticising, as some narratives then find it hard to find expression. there is a risk that we start to repress stories because they can be co-opted into homonationalist agenda.
- Al-Qaws has a policy of not taking refugee cases because of bad experiences of people using fake stories because they know the rules. The politics of being a refugee can be abused in order to leave the country, meaning that people who actually need to leave cannot. Particular people can leave, such as those with English and friends in high places.
- Al-Qaws is often asked to give statements proving that people are oppressed in particular ways., which creates a local narrative that Palestinian society has a campaign against gays, and constructs a story of police oppression rather than thinking about familial homophobia. There is a fantasy of Palestinians running to Israel so they can be saved, and this story is used for delivery to asylum courts, but then constructs a local narrative and the way the local will begin to understand itself.

### Afternoon Discussion

#### *Future Collaborations*

The group discussed the collaborative process of work, raising the importance of picking up voices and contributions that are being sidelined. A dynamic process is needed for this. It was discussed how bibliographic and scholarly work can

counter the erasure that there is of people's work, it can counter censorship and lack of citation.

Other ideas and suggestions were:

- Publishing work online, posting work under creative commons
- Having a closed section to a webpage for communication
- Having a Facebook group is a good idea and can be useful for daily writing and sending articles. Additionally, a closed Facebook group can become a place online for venting anger and having a conversation.
- There are many people who are not on Facebook, so we need to find a way to avoid being on Facebook
- Can invite people to be involved in certain elements of our work so there is not too much at stake.
- Combine different types of writing and expression, performance, art etc.
- Finding ways to collect local work so we can be inspired by what is going on across different places.

Things to bear in mind:

- Finding a way of managing websites, forums, and online hubs
- Importance of people being able to manage them from different locations
- Blogs can work well as a medium, but takes energy to sustain
- Might need to find means that don't require sustaining.
- There should be a no reposting policy outside the group.
- Email list can work well and means that you can avoid Facebook updates and people are more sparing with information. Limitations of this are that email lists can get unruly, with people watching and not participating, and fractions can happen.
- Individuals need to be informed of decolonising activism in order to participate
- A virtual space would be useful for bringing the next generation with us, to pass on knowledge transfer. This can have more of an impact and makes sustainability more possible.
- There are limitations of funding.

Follow on:

- Further collaborations as part of conversations that have come out of this event.
- The need to engage with the next generation of activists and bring/invite them to meetings, too.
- Worth doing a similar event again, but outside of Europe where it is possible for other visas.
- This could also be done off the back of something else, to turn it into a festival.
- Idea of using Gay Games and World Pride as events to jump off
- A collaborative piece of writing that moves away from academic publishing because of direct and indirect censorship.
- Possibility of looking into online fora such as Feminist Wire where we can publish at the intersections of academic/activist
- Potential of print on demand

- We need a publication that addresses complications and tensions in solidarity and alliance. The conversation could be instigated by this group and then go for a more traditional format of people writing then others responding.
- The possibility of a new journal. It would need to build transnational connections and not be limited to an academic format.