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Sex, Desire, and Intimacy: Away from Privileged Abstractions

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When we meditated on the idea of publishing an issue on *Sex, Desire, and Intimacy*, we were hoping that its making process would be an exercise of vulnerability, one that does not shy out from putting gaps in regional literature as well as fantasies and insecurities of our own at the forefront of gender justice struggles. Some forms of academic arrogance downplayed sex as a subject of research and exploration, thus fortifying the idolatry of respect, of the body as a site of authenticity, of women as carriers of values. It evaded sex, presumed raw, primal, and animal for decades, and still does. Not this issue.

Instead, we worked in a different kind of avoidance; we circumvented hetero- and homo-normativities, as both hegemonic patriarchal discourses compete and reinforce by their rivalry the identitarian notions fixating and disciplining the bodies of women, queers, trans and non-binary folk, migrants, and kinksters. Individuals and communities find themselves under scrutiny, coded as subjects of shameful immoralities, their desires pathologized and their bodies fetishized as sites of sinful pleasure. We were taught that love, devoid of sex, is an idea dissociated from its practice. That submission is self-abasement, and others' dominance is self-exaltation. We have been dangerously connected with and disconnected from sex, as per centuries' old trick of keeping the oppressed occupied with non-immediate concerns, concerns that bypass the body.

Here, we hope to begin with the material, and there is no matter closer, more tangible and astute than our own bodies, often forced into a privileged abstraction.

This issue opens with "Talking Sex as a Necessity," an opinion piece by our editor in chief, **Ghiwa Sayegh**. When spoken, sex finds itself in never ending tropes blurring its connectedness to the material, levitating it into a place of privilege, or confining it in a pitfall of shame. Sex, binarily portrayed as almost surreal at times, and as an unethical consumption in others, is laid out on levels of respectability, from Rubin's walls to those of Ahmed, in a race towards innocence. Contemplating her locality within these walls, with no claim to radicalism, Sayegh moves to discuss the multitudes of silences surrounding sex, transforming it into a featureless notion feeding the illusions of righteousness and unity. We need to talk sex, not for essentialist recognition, but to trouble the structures that inform our silences and confessions.

Next, in our essays section, **Jaya Sharma** speaks of the "Politics of Fantasy." Informed by her activism in the Kinky Collective, Sharma bridges between sexual fantasy and other fantasies, as the binaries of pleasure and disgust spill over from one realm to the other, reciprocally. Often, our fantasies do not fit well with our politics, and it is precisely because the element of impossibility and taboo goes into the construction of desire. These fantasies are okay, she argues. Connecting with the mess inside us can help us understand and influence the mess outside. The ideological arguments in our struggles have failed us, and so did the politics of certainty. Perhaps it is those of doubt that will prove productive.

In the same context, **Tiffany Kagure Mugo** unpacks sex through pleasure, in her "Rope makes me fuzzy inside." She criticizes the redundant and patronizing ways of looking at African queer women sexualities, complicated with subbing and misogynoir. Instead, she offers an unorthodox approach, using the voices of feminist kinksters, who use BDSM to grapple with vulnerability and strength, thereby redefining agency and renegotiating power. While such sex is not radical by some non-normative virtue, it destabilizes ideas of entrenchment in rape culture: due to the explicit conversations around and negotiations of sex in the

context of play, we find women's entitlement to pleasure reinforced, and histories of oppression subverted.

In Openings, **Lady Gya** talks to **Rita Liavali Coquet**, a lesbian kinky dominant based in Berlin in "Reclaiming "Crazy:" an Interview on Mental Health, Play, and Lesbianism." In the witty interaction, the interviewee debunks myths and double standards surrounding mental health in the context of kink. She criticizes the pretense of care when one attempts to take away her agency sous-pretext of mental issues. The quest for happiness is wavered, as the interviewee reclaims crazy as proof of connectedness and awareness, and BDSM as a realm of agency and control. The interview goes to discuss the intricate interplays of intimacy, non-monogamy, exclusions, and myths of safe(r) sex in the context of non-normative sexualities.

Then, in "Sexual Processes: Conversations Undone Amongst Queer Tunisian Women," we hear the stories of coming of sexual age of **Aslan**, **Masha**, **Leila**, **Feryal**, and **Dorra**. Navigating curse words, pornography, and censorship, these women learn of their bodies and about sex, sacred, promised, awaited, and postponed. They learn how to pleasure themselves, and how to remain ambiguous and not forfeit to visibility. They challenge each other thinking of the values constructing their preferences; they see sex in a dialectic, as all things combined. They remind us that talking about sex is a critical exercise.

We move to "Beirut, a History," a biomythography by **X**. As an expatriate, X critiques notions of sex as a moral good dividing the world into camps of oppressed women, and liberated ones. She plays with notions of stickiness and repetition of her own desires, experienced in a place from which she was uprooted. She melancholically recalls memories of being queer in Beirut, contemplating different ruptures in time, space, and historical intimacy. She speaks of desire unraveling in loops and in longing, never as a finality. It longs to fill holes that are not merely romantic or sexual, as desire yearns for things uncontained in bodies; thought, belonging, intensity, and history.

We open our research section with **Patrick Haddad**'s "Occidental Gender Trouble and the Creation of the Oriental Sodomite." The research is an attempt to showcase interactions understood as Eastern-Western on the topic of same-sex contact. It takes upon itself the task of unpacking "Arab" homosexuality since the dawn of colonialism, critiquing the "Gay International" while rethinking Massad's disavowal of all epistemic identities of Western descent. He stresses that the history of Arab gay sexuality is interlinked with Nahdawi projects of modernization, and Victorian ideals, a moment rich in assumptions formed about the Oriental homosexual.

Next, **Saly El Wazze** explores the collapse of the online/offline binary within the Egyptian Crackdown and the Lebanese Tinder in "Identities Reconfigured, Online Dating Apps, and Incrimination." The article looks at how people of non-normative sexualities communicate their identities online, all the while questioning the presumption of safety in the age of digital surveillance. It discusses the sociopolitical identity signifiers promoted on dating apps in Lebanon, stressing the unequal access and unequal risks faced by LGBTIQ individuals depending on their citizenship, race, religious, and legal status among others. The online world can both construct and conceal these identities, troubling the binary of "closeted" and open, displaying ranges of desires that remain ambiguous to articulation.

Still in the realm of visualizing sexualities, **Sara Shaker**'s "Gender Binaries and Sexual Violence in Adult Comics During Post-Revolutionary Egypt" does important archival work in terms of documenting the local history this form of art and obstacles to its development. She moves to discuss the loadedness of comic dipiction of gender roles, paired with social status and ethnic background. Focusing on two main Egyptian comic magazines *Al Shakmgia* and *TukTuk*, Shaker explores the portrayal of gender roles and performances, through the refusal of a one-dimensional critique of patriarchy in relation to gender alone. She finishes by stressing that men's hegemony over the field of comics reinforces inequalities and hinders the un-learning process of static notions of violence and consent.

Like its title suggests, **Sonia Patrinou** explores in "Pornohealing: Pornography as a healing process for individuals with a history of sexual violence" whether concerned individuals can reconnect with their bodies through ethical, feminist, and queer porn. She uses Queer and Affect theories to discuss trauma, as trauma does not require cure but confrontation; it is a violent event unprocessed, a toxic memory. In her historically grounded research, Patrinou illustrates her arguments using examples of pornographic films, a web-based survey, and three interviews, to vouch for feminist porn's ability to decrease toxic stereotypes and disrupt rape culture.

Then, our testimonies section opens with "The Chronicles of a Young Egyptian *Sharmouta*." **Leila N.** carries the reader into her childhood and the earliest memories of people calling her a slut. She writes under a pseudonym, as complete disclosure would inescapably amplify the shame of her loved ones, a sentiment that ravishes on compulsory visibility. By explicitly and honestly reclaiming her sexuality, connected through instances of desire and disgust, agency, and violence, Leila N. archives a story of personal resistance against a world that fears women who do not fear themselves.

Still in the spirit of healing, in "Clit Intact," **Naazaneen Diwan** grieves women bodies that received the blame for men's grasping, bodies that were mutilated and for which sex without pain became an impossible luxury. With Bohra roots, Diwan expresses her perplexity about a clit that escaped the butchers, one that was spared. She poetically unpacks questions of community healing, its history and prospects, all the while lamenting the inability to critique with a clear conscious, as the discourse will inevitably be appropriated by predatory foreign feminists attempting to save us from fellow brown men. Healing does not occur with the downfall of one minion; rather, it needs a community where we do not judge each other nor hinder ourselves with unresolved guilt.

In her brutally honest testimony, "Love in the Times of Limp Dick," **Sophie Chamas** discusses the ways in which neither stability provides comfort, nor does sex provide satisfaction in the quest for a "normalcy" often dubbed as a "sanity." Feelings of numbness in bed and in life tell stories of a dystopian pressure to be certain kinds of lovers, to channel love through sex, as an inevitable consummation of fantasies bound to transcend the emotional realm into the physical. It is a story of mobility from a failed and impotent love, to one that thrives for sexual gratification, towards love that is self-critical and oblivious of societal standard of success.

Looking at a different type of a relationship that leaves one disheartened, **Priscilla Khabazi** writes "On Queer Friendships That Fails." Friendship is the most formally underappreciated bond; governments and societies were fast to sanction all other forms of relationships such as love into marriage, and marriage

into kin. As queers who think of alternative families away from these where nothing but blood serves as a bond, we can mourn the loss of a friendship, the failure to be kind, to reciprocate, to be open and tender. We can admit to ourselves that intimacy is not reserved for sex and romance, that it transcends these labels' porous boundaries. Perhaps then, we will have a community.

Finally, and along similar lines, **Bel South** closes the issue with her literary piece**,** "A Queer Ritual**,"** in which she attempts to trace what queer love feels, looks, and acts like in a world of privileges and power structures. She speaks of being witnessed in love as a growth in politics together, a challenge to one's assumptions, and an added reason to hold one's grounds. Queer love invigorates identity, but not in essentialism: it is not about whom we fuck; rather, it is about confrontation. She spells queer love as a daily practice: it is not resistance unless it interacts with the world, challenges its biases, forms its value, and unlearns its dogmas. It does not happen one relationship at a time; rather, "queer love is a communal project."

For we have been force-fed notions of sex, desire, and intimacy being – when non-normative – individual undertakings, tastes, or quirks. But they do not exist in a vacuum, and neither does sex function independently from one's mind and their history, nor does love reconcile the body with sex. We are not torn between the lowest part of ourselves and a supernatural claim to sanctity. But we are torn apart, as communities, and scattered into different levels of patriarchal respectability. Conversely, the need and desire to nurture each other, or to embrace and reclaim our non-normative sexualities and controversial fantasies is not pathological; it is redemptive. Within that knowledge, power is rediscovered, and with it a connectedness so feared by a patriarchal world.