

"It is known." I grew up hearing that about a variety of people, places, and things from relatives, friends, and strangers. So much of what is taken as common sense or quotidian knowledge in the Middle East and North Africa has its root in transtemporal and cross-spatial rumour and whisper. Perhaps it is inaccurate, then, to refer to this as a root, as the beginnings of rumours and the whispery paths they traverse are hard to trace, locate, and map.

Knowing with certainty without knowing the origins, location, and justification of that knowledge is certainly not unique to the MENA. That is, after all, why so many scholars have worked to de-naturalise what we take as common sense, to link it to power and to the entanglement of knowledge with power, to understand and articulate the body as a canvas onto which discourse has been carved over and over again until it sinks into the subcutaneous and comes to be perceived as always having been there, as always having been known and merely discovered and unearthed, rather than invented.

If we accept that so much of what is known and, therefore, what is said, about queer people in the MENA is a product of rumour and whisper, of speculation in the service of power and the normative, does that alter how we go about re-narrating the past, present, and future of queerness in the region?

Should queers prove that they have always been here, here being the MENA in this case? What might it do or what might it mean to abandon normative methodologies and evidence and embrace the very means through which queerphobic knowledge has been produced and sedimented to not so much locate the queer MENA subject across time and space but imagine them? To map not so much the trace of concrete being but to carve out new paths for becoming? What if we began to not only whisper counter-hegemonic rumours but to take into our mouths those toxic, poisonous words and terms that have left a bad taste for queerness and spit them back out as something else, something that, while for many might still be perceived or experienced as off-putting, as nauseating, as foreign and therefore dangerous, for those whose tongues yearn to touch something that can taste like home amidst alienation and coldness made ordinary, can feel like a coating and exhilarating warmth, like belonging, like home?

Can homes, can belonging, be built not merely atop the consequences of violence but from that violence itself? What would it mean to anchor the self in that which threatens to alienate and/or to kill? What if slurs, rather than being experienced as a means through which to push one away, to drive one underground, to expel, were refashioned into a homecoming, into a means of ushering one into belonging and community?

I was struck by the preponderance of slurs in this queer Arab glossary. One might assume, when being handed a glossary of queer Arab terminology, that most of that compendium would be comprised of the ways through which queer Arabs articulate their identities or practices, relate to one another, classify one another, and engage in coded ways of identifying one another. This glossary, however, largely documents the language through which queer Arabs are linguistically fashioned and re-fashioned into deviants by society at large. I found myself ruminating on the political implications of folding this terminology into this glossary – of making it into not merely a part but a foundational element of a queer Arab lexicon.

'Bend over, you are in Idlib', the glossary tells us, pointing to the rumoured preponderance of gay men in the Syrian city. There is no investment in challenging the idea that certain Arab locales are hubs for queer relationality, despite the emasculating, demonising, and even de-humanising purpose that such claims are meant to serve. So what if Idlib is queer as fuck? That seems to be the implicit response to this rumour. Coupled with a plethora of cross-regional modes of classifying and identifying queers, the glossary also appears to point to a region that, via its own lexicography, implies a sort of queer infestation. Aren't all of your cities and towns queer? If not, why do you need so many terms? If not, why are you always on the lookout?

Rather than challenge deviance as a framework, the glossary seems to de-stabilise the region's own understanding of what its most normative and most dominant sexual and gendered practices are. Yes, the glossary seems to say, we are deviants, but aren't we all? Or, if bottoming is deviance, if gender play is deviance, if effeminacy is deviance, if promiscuity is deviance, and all of these things are also joy, are also pleasure, are also exhilaration, which is at the root of their being framed as immoral, as sinful, as evil, and their being labelled deviance is an injunction to control oneself, to deprive oneself, then more power to the deviant, and may we all learn from them how to live more fully and in service of the body and the politics of its pleasurable potentialities.

Yes, I am a deviant. Why are you so obsessed with me? You claim deviance leaves a bad taste in your mouth, but you can't stop sucking on it, twisting your tongue around it, swallowing it, gagging, spitting it back out, slurping it back up again, foaming at the mouth with it. Are you sure you don't like the taste?

The glossary with its transtemporal and cross-spatial approach to a regional lexicon of queerness, seems to say not so much that queers have always been here as deviance has, and to reframe deviance into a politics of bodily pleasure and subterranean communal belonging. What might we become when we embrace our otherness and invite others into it, rather than attempting to normalise ourselves and to fold ourselves into a norm rooted in self and communal deprivation and policing that is only ever meant to serve those whose power depends on the distracting potential of moral and sex panics?

What happens when we lean into the panic, when we invite others to hyperventilate as they watch deviance run rampant, so that they may see the pleasure in that crossing of boundaries, in the body opening up to itself and others, and harness that pleasure as a means of seeing past and through the discursive undergirding of power? What's so threatening about a bottom? What's so threatening about a tomboy? If we sit with the terms through which queers are demonised, the very discursive means through which they are constructed as other, as danger, as contaminant, and swallow not only the benign nature of the acts through which these constructions are articulated but their titillating potential, what becomes of the queer and the harm we assume they threaten? What happens to our understanding of what and who these frameworks serve and how our lives have been lived not in service of the good and just and holy, but of political and economic corruption masquerading as moral guardian?

There is, moreover, no desire to curate an indigenous queer Arab lexicon via this glossary. Terms that point to a pre-modern and pre-colonial history of non-normative and fluid gender

and sexuality sit alongside Arabised versions of Western terms. Queerness, here, is presented as invention, as becoming rather than being. Queer Arabness is, we are shown, always in the process of being made and unmade, endlessly being built through an amalgamation of ways of seeing and knowing across time and space. There is no one way to be queer, to be Arab, and therefore to be and to speak queer Arabness. Its beauty is in its inauthenticity, in its destabilising potential, in its simultaneous rootedness and un-rootedness. It refuses to be unmoored from the region, but it also refuses the boundaries of that region as curators of identity and becoming. It borrows and plays, fashions and re-fashions, undermines and subverts. It is an invitation to question, to imagine, to become other and more than what we have been told we can be.

More than anything, however, this is a glossary by and for queer Arabs. It is a reminder that queer Arabs have always and will always find and cultivate home amongst one another, that in their collectivity and via the joy that can be derived from coded language they can refuse their framing as oxymoronic by both Western queers and Arab heterosexuals. It is a reminder of the political importance of creating discursive means through which queer Arabs can not only articulate themselves but see themselves in others who share their identitarian struggles and are creatively finding ways to refuse their alienation both at home and abroad, to refuse the injunction to be either queer or Arab, and to accept the invitation to unmake and remake both of these orientations. It is a reminder that archives need not be authorised, need not be evidence-based, and that they can be felt, be swallowed, be spit back out, and that language and people can be a home when place is unwelcoming.