

Transnational Politics and Feminist Inquiries in the Middle East: An Interview with Lila Abu-Lughod

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Lila Abu-Lughod is Joseph L. Battenwieser Professor of Social Science at Columbia University in New York. She works in both the departments of Anthropology and Women's and Gender Studies. Her books include *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986), *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (1993/2008), winner of the Victor Turner Prize for Ethnographic Writing, and *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (2005), which won the American Ethnological Society's Senior Book Prize. She has also edited *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (1998), and co-edited *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (2002) and *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (2007).

In 2001 Professor Abu-Lughod delivered the celebrated Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures at the University of Rochester. Named a Carnegie Scholar in 2007, Lila Abu-Lughod has held highly esteemed fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, Fulbright, and the Mellon Foundation, among many others.

In this interview Professor Abu-Lughod traces how her detour through postcolonial studies and transnational feminism created new possibilities for inquiries into the Middle East, while emphasizing how important ethnographic research was for her as a means of addressing key issues in postcolonial studies. The interview then focuses on the question of Palestine: Abu-Lughod talks about her father, the eminent scholar Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, who came from Palestine to the USA and returned to Palestine later in his life, as well as her personal and professional commitments to justice in the region. She reflects on the distinctive ways in which women experience militarized zones of conflict, such as Palestine, as well as on the intersectional politics between the Palestinian cause and gender justice for sexual minorities. Elaborating on how Palestinian art has played a key activist role in resisting Israeli oppression against the Palestinians, the interview ends with Abu-Lughod discussing how her forthcoming book *Saving Muslim Women* speaks to transnational feminist inquiries in the Middle East.

This interview was conducted long distance in the summer of 2010 while I was conducting research on Palestine at Columbia University, and Professor Abu-Lughod had just moved to the UK from Columbia for a year-long research leave. Stephanie Ogden from the

Center for New Media Teaching and Learning at Columbia was especially helpful in arranging this interview, while Michael Cenammo, also from the Center, was willing to extend all of their resources to accomplish this long-distance interview. My travel to Columbia University and a two-month stay in New York City were made possible by an Arts and Humanities Research Enhancement Grant from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

BD: Scholars like Chandra Mohanty have seen postcolonial feminism and transnational feminism as intersecting projects. How do you see these projects standing in relation to each other? Why?

LA: I have always had questions about feminist projects, whether in their postcolonial/nationalist or transnational forms. In the 1990s I brought together a group of feminist scholars who were thinking critically about modernizing projects of reforming women in the colonial and postcolonial world—what some scholars were calling feminism. In the book I edited after our conference, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton 1998), these scholars challenged the conventional wisdom that celebrated feminist projects in places like Egypt and Iran as liberatory but they also challenged my own too critical stance toward modernizing projects as colonial and Western. They taught me that many of these projects to remake women through education, through enlisting them into national development, through professionalizing domesticity (including the demands that they learn scientific hygiene and childrearing), were both regulatory and emancipatory. They brought into being new forms of disciplining women but also opened up unanticipated possibilities. And instead of thinking in terms of a colonial binary of East/West, we had to recognize complex entanglements and new hybrids, such as when colonial ideals of scientific childrearing were reshaped by local traditions of moral upbringing and the ideology of Islamic renewal.

This was the first collection of essays on women and gender politics in the Middle East to be fully engaged with postcolonial theory, inspired by a Foucauldian attention to the disciplinary power of modern liberal states and a wariness about nationalism that had been made possible by the work of the Subaltern Studies school of Indian historiography, which not many Middle East scholars at the time were reading.

I had been fortunate, though, to spend a year at the University of Pennsylvania as a Mellon Fellow in 1988-89, when the South Asia Seminar's theme was "Orientalism and Beyond." I attended the seminar, organized by the late Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, regularly since it was the most stimulating intellectual forum at Penn. South Asian studies had always been strong there, but Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, just starting up *Public Culture*, were now a vital influence. Always lively and sometimes contentious, the seminar introduced me to postcolonial studies. Leading (then young) South Asia scholars like Lata Mani, Gyan Prakash, and Nicholas Dirks came to speak. Because of my exposure to this field, I

decided the next year, with Timothy Mitchell and Gyan Prakash, to organize a series of workshops (that continued over the next decade) to bring together Middle East and South Asia scholars. Our idea was to push forward what we saw as post-Orientalist scholarship in area studies and the human sciences. The rubric was “Questions of Modernity.” The Social Science Research Council and New York University helped support these workshops. Two books came out of these exchanges—not just my *Remaking Women* but Timothy Mitchell’s *Questions of Modernity* (Minnesota 2000)—though the effects were much more profound.

As an anthropologist whose main work involved intensive fieldwork in specific communities in Egypt, this foray into postcolonial studies was a kind of detour, one that was exciting intellectually and took me temporarily beyond my discipline. In 2001 I took what I thought would be another detour from anthropology—into transnational feminist studies. It has turned out to be much more. I was shocked into confronting the ethics and politics of the different intellectual/political field of contemporary transnational feminism, with its global alliances, international ambitions, and imbrications with the international human rights regime, when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan. The deployment of the figure of the oppressed Afghan woman in need of liberation, uniting the Bush administration and many feminists, unnerved me. My colleague Rosalind Morris, then director of the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Columbia University, invited me to give a lecture in the “Forum on War” that she had organized. At first I said no. What could an anthropologist like me who worked in Egypt have to contribute? But then I did it—joining Gayatri Spivak, Judith Butler, and Catherine Lutz. In my lecture, I pointed out the colonial resonances of the current project of liberating Muslim women and tried to offer a more ethical political stance for Americans and other westerners concerned about women’s rights. I argued for taking responsibility for our own political and historical roles in shaping the lives and situations of Afghan women. I revised the lecture and published it in 2002 as “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” I have been surprised to find that it has become my most read article, easily surpassing “The Romance of Resistance.”

This lecture was both a political and intellectual intervention. It led me to want to know and think more about feminism and liberalism in an international frame. But I would approach matters not as a transnational feminist but as an ethnographer. I decided to look hard at the language of rights (I now call it a dialect) and to study feminist projects in the world. I can’t help approaching even this subject in light of my intimate knowledge of the everyday lives of women in particular communities in the Arab world. I had been doing fieldwork in Egypt for more than twenty years at that point, and was just finishing a book on national pedagogy and class politics in Egyptian television soap operas (*Dramas of Nationhood*, 2005).

BD: You have worked and published extensively on Bedouin women. Why have you chosen to focus on the figure of the Bedouin woman? What epistemological limits in the culture of feminist studies is your work trying to push by illuminating this figure? How does this figure make an intervention into the discourse of imperialism and transnational feminism?

LA: This question highlights the difference between postcolonial studies and what anthropology has been for me. I have indeed written about the women in one Bedouin community in Egypt where I did fieldwork on and off for over a decade, beginning in 1978. But the “Bedouin woman” is not a “figure” for me. Instead, they are living women in a small Bedouin community in Egypt that I have had the privilege to get to know. They let me share in their lives and families. They recited poetry, they told stories, they talked to each other, they let me tag along to weddings and funerals, they confided in me, and they fed me. I watched their daughters grow up. I learned something about their relations with husbands, brothers, mothers-in-law, co-wives, daughters, and neighbors.

Initially, I had no intention of “illuminating this figure.” My goal in *Veiled Sentiments*, my first book about them, was to faithfully convey something about the lives of the particular women I had come to know and to analyze as best as I could the complexity of gender relations in the community. It may sound naïve to say this, given the critiques of anthropology that we have all accepted and that I share, but I believe that the incredible personal investment that ethnography represents is a form of deep respect for “others” that is rare in the world. And the politics of my first book was simply to humanize these women for those who didn’t know about this part of the world by showing the richness of their moral system and the poignant beauty of their poetry.

It was only in my second ethnography of the same community, *Writing Women’s Worlds*, that I began my explicit concern with the politics of representation. I had become increasingly aware, as I took on board Edward Said’s arguments about Orientalism and as the figure of the Arab and the Muslim as a negative became more and more newsworthy and disturbing, that women like the ones I knew were serving as “figures” for the West, and even for urban communities in Egypt and the Arab world. The question became “How could I use what I knew about them to disrupt and confront stereotypes?” I decided to do this not by whitewashing their practices or through ideological posturing but by going deeply into their everyday worlds, their arguments, their differences, their dilemmas, and their individual life stories.

A few years ago, I was asked to write a preface for a fifteenth anniversary edition of *Writing Women’s Worlds*. By then, I was fully engaged with issues in transnational feminism. Muslim women had become even more central “figures” in international debates since Afghanistan. So I tried to articulate the ways that the women’s lives I had described in the book spoke to key tropes of the oppression of

Arab or Muslim women. And in that sense, I turned my friends into “figures” who could challenge representations of “Muslim women” as passive, lacking in individuality, and in need of saving. That book was my first attempt to show how the categories by which their “oppression” might be measured—polygamy, patriarchy, or moral systems tied to sexuality—did not do justice to their lives or their experiences.

BD: Your work has mostly been about Egypt. But in 2007 you co-edited *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* with Ahmad H. Sa'di of Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. What personal and professional commitments inspired you to take up this project?

LA: As the daughter of a 1948 Palestinian refugee, I was always aware of Palestine and the injustice done by the creation of the state of Israel. My father was active politically and intellectually in the cause, but I shied away from the issue because it was so contentious. In 1992, after more than forty years in exile, my father moved “back” to Palestine. Not to Jaffa, his hometown (which was inside the Green Line and part of Israel now), but to Ramallah, in the territories Israel occupied in 1967. I went to visit him a few times over the years, seeing the situation up close. He took us all around, introduced us to his friends in various parts of historic Palestine and to colleagues at Birzeit University, where he was teaching.

Sadly, he died in 2001, only nine years after moving back. At his funeral, his close friend Edward Said introduced me to Ahmad Sa'di as “a brilliant young Palestinian sociologist.” He and Edward had started talking about the silence around the Palestinian “nakba” [1948] (catastrophe) and had decided to get people to write about the expulsion, as a counter-narrative to the dominant story of the birth of Israel that overshadowed ours. When Edward passed away, just a couple of years later, Ahmad asked if I would work on the book with him. I was so moved by my experiences in Palestine that I agreed. This was a way for me to connect to the place, through scholarship, my métier, rather than activism. And it was a way to do something as a tribute to my father. I had already started writing about his return to Palestine, the memories he had shared with me, and the meaning of his death that so many people there had read as an exercise of his “right of return.” I often write to come to terms with hard experiences and for me his loss was very hard.

So that is how I started working on Palestine. The book is not a memory project, as you describe it, and not a collection of individual testimonials or personal reflections. It is a sustained examination of the nature, shapes, and determinants of Palestinian collective, social, or cultural memory. We are critical of the canonization of certain stories and symbols; the exclusion of women's memories; and the nostalgia or nationalism that shape narratives of the past. I think we brought together a brilliant group of scholars of Palestinian memory. They analyze interviews and oral histories, films, literary works, and memory books, reflecting on what it means to have been displaced,

dispossessed, and dismissed as well as [on] how memory and narrative work. I see *Nakba* as a contribution to the field of cultural memory studies, whose key texts have come from scholars working on the Holocaust.

BD: *Nakba* is a transnational endeavor where academics from the occupied territories and the US worked together on a Palestinian project to illuminate a repressed counter-narrative of dispossession. Do you see a similar transnational feminist coalition between Palestinian and Israeli women and women from across the world as a platform which could push for political changes in the Middle East in distinctive ways?

LA: Actually, the contributors to *Nakba* were chosen for their scholarly expertise. All had worked on Palestine and Palestinians for years. Through their intimate understanding of the situation and its history, they are all critical of Zionist narratives and the violent politics they justify. I didn't see this as a coalitional project, though it was a collaboration to illuminate what has been deliberately hidden or denied about Israel's actions and their impact on Palestinians. We share the understanding that "the occupation" (by which people usually mean the Israeli take-over of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967) is not the central problem in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Nothing will be resolved until the injustice of the foundational events of 1948 is recognized. As Ahmad Sa'di, a Palestinian citizen of Israel, explains in the Afterword, it is a matter of moral responsibility. We focus on the past but the book is meant to intervene in the present.

Nakba included several essays that focused on Palestinian women's experiences of the expulsion and refugee life, but Ahmad and I didn't conceive of this as a feminist project. Since working on that book, though, I have become extremely interested in what Palestinian feminists, as activists and researchers, have been doing on the ground. I find them quite impressive—courageous, energetic, and smart. And I've been particularly intrigued with the remarkable way they balance their feminist critiques with their recognition of the way the larger political situation shapes gender relations. Palestinian feminists are consistent in tracing the connection between forms of family violence and the facts of Israeli harassment, arrests, imprisonment and military violence—of humiliated men in poverty, of besieged families living with fear and inhuman conditions. Palestinian women's NGOs point to the larger structural features that affect Palestinian women's lives, even as they participate in transnational women's rights institutions and networks. Similarly, they cannot afford not to work with human rights frames. But those scholar-activists on the ground who assist international rights organizations are often dismayed to find, as Penny Johnson at Birzeit University says, that their analysis of violence of the occupation and siege and its effects on women and families does not get included in the final reports. Reports like the 2006 Human Rights Watch report on violence against Palestinian women and girls, *A Question of Security*, they say, isolate domestic violence, gender, and

family from their contexts. This report, for example, ignores the effects of the Israeli occupation and siege on the Palestinian Authority's ability to enforce law. It also does not look at the effects of the pervasive violence and economic strangulation on Palestinian family relations. Nadera Shalhoub Kevorkian, who helped with the Human Rights Watch report, insists in her new book, *Militarization and Violence against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East* (2009) that in conflict zones we can see how the personal is political and how there is no way to disengage the "home" and the "front."

BD: In "Spacio-cide and Bio-politics: the Israeli Colonial Project from 1947 to the Wall" Sari Hanafi calls the violence against Palestinians spaciocide rather than genocide. Do you think Hanafi's paradigm adequately represents the Israeli apartheid?

LA: Although I don't go for neologisms, Hanafi's "spaciocide" captures well the key dynamic of Zionist colonization and the continuing policies and practices toward Palestinians. The goal is to remove Palestinians from their land. Whether through military violence, constant harassment, restriction of building permits, refusals of family reunification, selective gentrification, interference with education, economic strangulation, racist discrimination, incarceration, building settlements, or outright property expropriation, what Erskine Childers described as the "wordless wish" in the 1940s to make Palestinians disappear continues to shape Israeli policy. Making life impossible for Palestinians within the Green Line (the pre-67 borders of Israel) or in the Occupied Territories is intended to force them to leave. Hence the classic Palestinian celebration of "sumoud" or steadfastness: the refusal to leave, to give up what's left of one's space and place in Palestine.

BD: Could you talk about how Palestinian visual and performative art has played an activist role in the face of Israeli violence?

LA: I'm continually floored by Palestinians' creativity in responding to Israeli violence. Palestinian artists, musicians, and filmmakers are engaged in the struggle and responsive to the dire situation in which Palestinians find themselves. Although the PLO mobilized the arts in the liberation struggle in the 1970s and 80s, with extraordinary posters and films being produced, the independent efforts of artists and performers in the last couple of decades have been more stunning.

The poet Mahmoud Darwish was legendary for giving voice to Palestinian dreams and suffering, and his death in 2008 was mourned across the world. But he was not alone in marrying politics and art. Many visual artists and filmmakers are seeking to express, inform, and transform the Palestinian condition, if with more limited audiences. For example, Rana Bishara, a wonderful painter and artist from Tarsheeha who teaches at Al-Quds University, often works with ordinary objects that symbolize Palestine. She pickles the prickly cactus that stubbornly returns to mark the old borders of Palestinian

fields. She sets herself up wearing embroidered Palestinian peasant robes to stitch together loaves of Arab bread, suggesting the disruption of daily bread and livelihood under occupation. Vera Tamari depicts olive trees. It is hundred-year-old trees whose ruthless uprootings by Israeli bulldozers bring wails from farmers who have tended them all their lives. It is ancient trees whose harvesting is regularly disrupted by Israeli settlers with guns. Then there is Emily Jacir, based in New York and Ramallah. She sets up a refugee tent like the ones Palestinians were forced to live in after their expulsion in 1948 and into which those whose homes are demolished regularly in places like Gaza still move. In what she titles “Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948” she invited people to come to her studio to embroider the names of these villages onto the tent. 140 people came, most of whom she had never met before.

Independent Palestinian filmmaking has flourished in the past twenty years. Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscript Collection is now the depository for a unique collection of over a hundred Palestinian films, among them many of the feature films, video diaries, and documentaries screened at “Dreams of a Nation,” the Palestinian film festival organized by Hamid Dabashi and Columbia film school graduate, Annemarie Jacir (see *Dreams of a Nation* 2006). The ubiquitous political conditions of occupation, especially closure and control, have even given rise to a distinctive Palestinian genre: what Dabashi calls “The Checkpoint Film.” This is not to be confused with the 2003 performance piece by Sharif Waked called “Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints.” This satirical fashion show models cutout clothing for young men created just for checkpoints—allowing for Israeli soldiers’ searches and enforced bodily exposure. Above on screens are real photographs of Palestinian men with arms raised, clothing removed, humiliated at gunpoint.

Hany Abu-Assad, one of Palestine’s many brilliant film-makers, has recently used whimsy and humor to devastating effect in a short film called “A Boy, a Wall, and a Donkey.” In four minutes, the film says everything you need to know about the absurdity of Israeli security and the imbalance in violence between Palestinians and Israelis. It is about the simple hopes of children trying to live normal lives in a situation that is deeply abnormal. All they want to do is make a video. Again, art and politics.

Palestinian musicians are no less involved. They range from classical musicians who struggle to find ways to teach new generations to play instruments, forced to rebuild after their fledgling music school in Gaza is bombarded, to a new generation of hip hop artists. These appear in Jackie Salloum’s film, “Slingshot Hiphop.” Instead of throwing stones, they throw words. From the urban ghetto of Lyd, we get Dam, a hip hop group that now tours internationally. One of their most effective music videos is “Who’s the Terrorist?”

Even at the level of popular politics, one finds inventive creativity. At one of the weekly demonstrations in Bil’in against the Israeli Separation Wall that was cutting villagers off from their own

fields, some young men painted in blue advanced peacefully toward the soldiers, evoking the blockbuster American film "Avatar." When I saw the YouTube clips of this spectacle, I had to rent the film. The symbolism was clear: Palestinians were the innocent community living on their land who were suddenly subjected to horrific military violence to remove them. Spaciocide indeed. At another demonstration near Nablus, the filmmaker Sobhi Al-Zobaidi captured a group of people dressed as native Americans. Drawing attention to the parallels between the two colonial disposessions, he titled this short film "Red, Green, Black, and White Indians." The colors of the Palestinian flag.

BD: In 2010 the activist group Queers Against Israeli Apartheid has faced censorship from Pride Toronto though eventually the decision to censor the term "Israeli apartheid" from the parade was reversed in the face of severe protests from Toronto's LGBT community. What kinds of gains and losses do you think result from such transnational resistance to Israeli violence against Palestinians? Do you think the merging of causes like the Palestinian right to a homeland and the LGBT community's fight as sexual minorities takes away from the particular focus of the individual causes though both are cultures of struggle against violence?

LA: I think this sort of intersectional politics is essential, especially if we are to guard against the retrograde politics of what Jasbir Puar in her book *Terrorist Assemblages* (2009) has so aptly analyzed as "homonationalism" and to make sure that the Israeli state does not succeed in hijacking "gay rights" as part of its international machinery for hiding its own violence towards Palestinians and illiberalism. This is something my colleague Katherine Franke at Columbia Law School has written about, though Wendy Brown's critique of "tolerance" in her book *Regulating Aversion* is the best there is.

BD: Finally, could you elaborate on your recent and ongoing work, particularly on how it responds to some of the transnational issues and questions raised above?

LA: I'm just finishing a book called *Saving Muslim Women*. It brings together the writing I've been doing over the past eight years or so on the ethics and politics of the international circulation of discourses about the oppressed Muslim woman and the practices these discourses give rise to. I see this as an intervention into transnational feminist studies.

I've been looking closely at the hysterical obsession with the figure of the Muslim woman as victim of her culture, traditions, or religion, even by well-meaning people who either don't know much about life on the ground or who, for problematic political reasons, bracket out key determinants of women's experiences of violence or suffering in these communities. It might seem odd coming from an anthropologist, but I insist that cultural arguments are a dangerous way to go. In my book, I show this for example by taking on, in one

chapter, one of the most sensationalized cultural categories that, since the 1990s, has mobilized feminists and right-wing anti-immigrant groups: the “honor crime.” I show how the category was created, what fantasies animate it, where its appeal lies, and what political work it does—especially in stigmatizing Muslim communities.

One of my key arguments in this book is that we need to be vigilant against cultural explanations because of the way they are distributed unequally in the world. If I had to think of one “culture” to blame for the violence affecting women in the parts of the world that we think of as Muslim, it would be that of armed conflict and militarism. We don’t normally call militarism a culture or tradition, or relate it to specific religions like Judaism or Christianity, though in the contemporary world—in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Israel/Palestine—it *could* look like that. We call it politics, connected to economics.

But it’s not only in conflict zones that local culture, tradition, or religion is a screen that camouflages the structures of violence that are global in nature. One of the other chapters in the book is about a case of domestic violence in a rural village in Egypt where I’ve worked for fifteen years. I argue that the framework of women’s rights as human rights is inadequate for grasping the complicated situation in which one young woman I know has marital difficulties. Her husband is violent when he drinks. Why does he drink in a community where it is wrong? Because he’s been part of the tourism industry and has mixed with foreigners since [he was] young in this extremely poor region of Egypt. He, like some other local men, has also had a twenty-year relationship with a much older European woman who helps support him. Global inequalities of wealth and western feminism that give European women money and [freedom to] travel: these are critical to placing this young local woman in a tense marriage. Another complication also has to do with poverty: she’s a poor relation and his marriage to her was meant as a kind of protection and gift. So there are bonds of attachment that keep her there. Also, she has two small kids now and her family is too poor to support her and them if she leaves her husband. She’s stuck. And there’s more. She herself comes from a broken home. She has been the victim of an inadequate medical system that has not been able to help her with some problems she’s had since a girl, despite her mother’s constant efforts to find help for her. So we don’t know what part mental illness plays in the marital troubles. But we do know that despite leaving her husband from time to time, she chose a third pregnancy. Other women in the village understand that she wants a family life, just like they do, even though this is often not smooth.

Now I’ve been studying women’s rights work in the Middle East ethnographically and have become convinced that there are many limits to the framework of rights they use, even if pursued through the latest more ‘indigenous’ initiatives to reform Muslim family law or to promote and publicize gender egalitarian interpretations of the Qur’an. These frameworks can’t capture the complexity of this young woman’s life situation or enable us to disentangle the strands of her suffering. Or offer a solution to her complicated problems. If we don’t consider the

larger political and structural problems of global inequalities of wealth, wars and occupations, and local regimes propped up by outsiders even when they don't serve their populations—producing insecurity, poverty, unemployment, inadequate schooling or medical care—we can't understand why women like her have foreclosed options and live in basic conditions that sometimes allow for domestic violence.

In other words, as long as we focus on the personal violence of the gendered domestic sphere, as if it were detached from the larger global political field, and as long as we continue to selectively blame culture or religion for some women's suffering without attention to the larger structures in which families and women live their lives—structures that I've argued for years we in the metropole are actually very responsible for creating—we won't be able to solve anything. But many professional feminists, through their work in NGOs and for international human rights organizations, will make good livings trying. *Saving Muslim Women* is a real departure for me. In it I try to use ethnography to confront transnational feminism with its complicity, willing or unwitting, with transnational governance and the divisive geocultural imagination that facilitates it. I've been developing many of my ideas about the limits of rights frameworks and what Janet Halley calls "governance feminism" in the context of a project called "Liberalism's Others" through the Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference (www.socialdifference.org) that I co-direct at Columbia.

Although I always work alone in my anthropological fieldwork, learning from the people I'm "studying," I think you can see that I love working collaboratively with others who know much more, either in terms of theory or substance, when I decide to explore new areas that are not exactly in my field. As part of "Liberalism's Others" I've been running a series of workshops under the general title of "Who's Afraid of Shari'a?" I keep bringing together scholars who work critically on legal regulation, reform, and everyday practice in particular places in the Muslim world, with the goal of moving beyond the polarized debates about women's rights and *shari'a*. These debates typically divide those who advocate *shari'a* as a symbol (and practice) of authenticity and those who fear it as a sign of fundamentalist obscurantism. It is the application of *shari'a* to the regulation of women's lives and conduct, particularly in its practical form as personal status law in postcolonial states, that has generated the greatest controversy as well as some of the most innovative thinking by feminists.

In our last workshop, we interrogated "consent" (socialdifference.org). Consent is crucial to the current imagination of both the infringement of women's rights (as in the much publicized issue of "forced marriage") and their guarantee through legal reform of Muslim family law (as in the regulation of polygamy and the promotion of model marriage contracts to protect property and other rights). But what does consent mean? Is it the same concept in Islamic legal reasoning as in liberalism? What presumptions about the individual and gendered social life does it carry? This focus was

inspired by a lecture Judith Butler recently gave at Columbia Law School in which she showed how tricky consent is when it comes to matters of intimate relationships that are both deeply complex and always characterized by the unknowability of the future.

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