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Life in Purple: An Exploration of Moroccan LGBT+ Identity and Migration

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SIT Graduate Institute - Study Abroad

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RUNNING HEAD: LIFE IN PURPLE

“I’m not just one color or two colors. I am different types of shades and colors”

Life in Purple: An Exploration of Moroccan LGBT+ Identity and Migration

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SIT: Migration and Transnational Identity

Spring 2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to sincerely thank the members of the LGBT+ community in Morocco who took the time to meet with me and to entrust me with their stories. I am incredibly grateful to have met these people, who taught me so much during my time in Morocco. Their bravery inspires me to live an honest and proud life. I wish them all the best in their personal and activist aspirations.

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Lately, I discovered this balance between femininity and masculinity that I have inside of me and for me, I call it 'purple.' I was talking to my friend just yesterday about this, my favorite color is purple, like a very specific purple. It's like a strong red, like a blood red and a very strong blue, a royal blue. That's how I see myself is like a mix of these two colors. Then it makes a very strong purple. That's how I see myself. I'm not just one color or two colors, I am a whole mix. I am different types of shades and colors. That wasn't very easy for me to accept because I thought: how am I going to make someone treat me as the boy or the man that I am if I'm not manly? I need to be one hundred percent manly, but then no one is one hundred percent manly or one hundred percent feminine. It doesn't work like that. You're just human.

Hamza

Do you not observe that God sends down water from the sky and by it we bring forth fruits of varying colors? And how in the mountains there are streaks of white and red in different shades along with rocks jet-black? Human beings and beasts and livestock are likewise of diverse colors. Indeed, those who have knowledge from among God's servants revere God, for God is the empowering One, the One who forgives

Qur'an 35:27–28

KEY TERMS

Gender and Sexuality

Sex: Refers to one's anatomical genitalia, through which one is classified as male or female.

Gender: Refers to one's expression of social behavior organized by gender norms, through which one is classified as masculine or feminine (2013, Kugle).

Sexuality: Refers to one's consciousness of sexual desire and expression of intimacy and pleasure, which includes not just one's sexual orientation (whether one desires sexual contact with an opposite-sex or a same-sex partner) but also more subtle issues of degree of sexual desire (whether one experiences sexual desire at all, for instance or in what ways) (2013, Kugle).

LGBT+: The acronym LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender. This acronym over time has lengthened, extending to several variations, including "LGBTQIA" and "LGBTQQIP2SAA." I instead use a + which refers to the many other identities along the spectrums of sexual orientations and gender identity that, if included, would create an impractically long acronym. This shortened version is not used with the purpose of silencing identities not included in LGBT, but rather, to imply that identities exist infinitely on this spectrum and no acronym could possibly encompass them all. Additionally, there are still many identities that have yet to be discovered and named that are represented in this + as well.

Transgender: A person who manifests the identity and behavior of the opposite gender from that which, in accordance with their anatomical sex organs, they were socialized to be. Transgender means a person has "moved across" from the gender into which they were socialized to the gender with which they identify (2013, Kugle).

Trans Male/Man: A person who transitions from female to male

Trans Female/Woman: A person who transitions from male to female

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity corresponds with that person's biological sex at birth.

Lesbian: A woman who is sexually attracted to women

Gay: A man who is sexually attracted to men, also used colloquially to refer to homosexuality in general, including lesbians.

Islam

Qur'an/Koran: The central text of Islam. Per Islamic belief, the Qur'an was verbally revealed by God to the prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel.

Hadith: Hadith are reports (often called “traditions”) of incidents in which the Prophet Mohammad said or did something that was observed by his followers and passed on orally until later written down (2013, Kugle). Hadith are second only to the Qur'an in developing Islamic jurisprudence.

Shari'a: Way of behavior obligated by a religion – religious law based upon scripture and Prophetic example. Most often applied to the Islamic system of ritual and legal norms, but each religion has a shari'a based upon its prior revealed scripture (2013, Kugle).

ABSTRACT

Currently, homosexuality is criminalized in Morocco under the Moroccan Penal Code Article 489 and most Moroccans view homosexuality as *haram*, prohibited by god. The LGBT+ community faces religious, legal and social pressures and persecution. Still, LGBT+ people continue to fight for their right to exist in Morocco and activists are working to protect members of the community from legal prosecution as well as form safe spaces for their community. At the same time, many members of the LGBT+ community in Morocco must emigrate to live their lives both honestly and safely. This paper aims to explore the current circumstances of LGBT+ people in Morocco and to highlight the stories of an LGBT+ person who is staying in Morocco and another who is leaving. The research in this paper is based primarily on two semi-structured interviews conducted in Rabat. The first interview was with the most famous lesbian in Morocco, 25-year-old activist, Hajar Moutaouakil, who became a prominent figure in the LGBT+ community after posting a YouTube video on the Moroccan National Human Rights Day in 2015 calling for love and tolerance. The second interview was with Hamza, a 20-year-old transgender male undergoing the process of obtaining a Canadian visa. The paper is supplemented by an interview with the Ambassador of Amsterdam Gay Pride, analyses of scholarly journal articles and examples of LGBT+ arrests in Morocco. The ultimate objective of this project is to describe to some extent the current situation of LGBT+ Moroccans in Morocco and abroad and to offer up some hopeful prospects for the future.

Key Words: Religion, Law, Gender Studies

INTRODUCTION

When I came to Morocco, I knew that homosexuality was criminalized, but I knew very little about how LGBT+ people in Morocco organized and lived their lives despite government persecution. I wanted to meet LGBT+ people in Morocco and learn about the ways that migration functioned in their expression of identity. For my research, I met with two members of the LGBT+ community to learn more about their unique experiences and the way that they forged their own identities, despite tremendous social and legal pressures.

In this paper, I will respond to the question: why might a member of the LGBT+ community choose to stay in Morocco or leave and what challenges and triumphs await members of this community in each destination? In this introductory section, I will begin by offering some brief religious, legal, and social context surrounding the subject of LGBT+ identity. I will then describe and reflect on my methods, their limitations and my positionality and assumptions. Next, I will present my findings and analysis, recounting the stories of the two LGBT+ Moroccan people I interviewed about their experiences in Morocco and their decisions to migrate or not to migrate. I will also describe what I discovered in my interview with Souad Boumedién, a Moroccan woman, and the 2017 Ambassador of Amsterdam Gay Pride, about the LGBT+ Moroccan community in Amsterdam alongside an analysis of some of the literature about LGBT+ Moroccans in Morocco and abroad to understand some of the theories that apply to LGBT+ Moroccan migration. Finally, I present my conclusion and suggestions for further research in this subject area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of religion in law and state in Morocco creates a complex legal situation for LGBT+ people. An analysis of the written laws is not sufficient to understand the situation, because the police sometimes enforce an unwritten code of morality that is influenced by conservative interpretations of Islam (2013, Kugle). The LGBT+ community also suffers from social prosecution, largely fueled by conservative interpretations of Islam. For this reason, I will begin by offering a brief overview of homosexuality and transgender identity in Islam and some of the arguments that have been made in support of and against LGBT+ identity by Muslim scholars based on religious texts. I will go on to talk about LGBT+ identity according to Moroccan law and society.

LGBT+ IN ISLAMIC BELIEF

HOMOSEXUALITY. Per the dominant vision of Islam, homosexuality is immoral, despite there being no explicit sanction against it in the Qur'an. There are, however, sanctions found in hadith, reports of what the prophet Mohammed said and did. This leaves room for philosophical debate, because the hadith are not the word of God, but are oral accounts. This means hadith can be interpreted and reinterpreted and the sources of hadith can be deemed unreliable. In a lecture entitled (Homo)sexuality in Islam, Professor Abdessamad Dialmy of Mohammed V University in Rabat explained that the sanctions against homosexuality from hadith diverge from the actual political sanctions against homosexuality in Muslim countries.

Mohammed is quoted in the hadith as saying, “if two men are found committing acts of lewd¹ then both active and passive partners should be killed.” However, because the Qur’an itself did not envisage a legal sanction against this sin, each school of Islam makes its own determinations about what acts are considered “lewd” and how these acts should be penalized. Punishment for same-sex sexual acts in Muslim countries thus take a variety of forms, including prison sentences, whippings, or death (2010, Dialmy). In addition, some minor doctrines like *Zahirism* (a Sunnite doctrine) and *Rafida* (a Shi’ite doctrine) affirm that homosexuality should not be punished at all. Some Muslims against the prosecution of homosexuality state that is not relevant anymore, because originally the purpose was to ensure that Islam is strong at its birth by procreating. Other state that a Muslim is still a Muslim despite sexuality and all believers have the same rights.

Do you not observe that God sends down water from the sky and by it we bring forth fruits of varying colors? And how in the mountains there are streaks of white and red in different shades along with rocks jet-black? Human beings and beasts and livestock are likewise of diverse colors. Indeed, those who have knowledge from among God’s servants revere God, for God is the empowering One, the One who forgives (Q. 35:27–28).

This verse is not only a powerful lens through which to critique the political hierarchies of race and color that most societies, including Islamic societies, have established, but also can apply to the diversity of life in general. These “varying colors” describe all aspects of the natural world, including plants and animals, biological and chemical processes, and the diversity of humanity. “It is scientific knowledge and medical research that can reveal to us the deeper

¹ Lewd [liwat] meaning anal sex between men

patterns of God’s creation,” Kugle explains, “This creation is far subtler than to place every human being into an easily definable box of either male or female” (2013, Kugle). This verse can be interpreted as allowing space for many diverse identifications in Islam, including LGBT+.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY. Mohammed is quoted in the hadith saying, “Let them be cursed (by God) men who try to resemble women and women who try to resemble men,” referring to resemblance in terms of clothes, speaking, voice, gesture, and lifestyle (2017, Dialmy). He also said, “Let effeminate men and masculinized women be cursed by God” and directs Muslims to “throw them out of your house” (2017, Dialmy). Since these are not statements made in the Qur’an, there is room for interpretation, but this does offer an explicit condemnation of behavior outside of societal gender norms.

*O people, we created you all from a male and female
And made you into different communities and different tribes
So that you should come to know one another
Acknowledging that the most noble among you
Is the one most aware of God Qur’an 49:13*

This is one of the Qur’anic verses that conservative Muslims use to argue against transgender identity, despite there being no mention of transgender people in the Qur’an. In his book, *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical reflection on gay, lesbian and transgender Muslims*, Muslim scholar, Scott Kugle discusses his own interpretation of the implications of this verse. He states that this verse implies that no Muslim is better than another because of any of the social categories that we use to classify ourselves, such as race, ethnicity, economic class, gender, or even sexual orientation. He explains, “A gay or lesbian Muslim is no less than a heterosexual Muslim, except by the intangible criterion of pious awareness of God (taqwa). A

transgender Muslim is no less than other Muslims who have not struggled with their own gender identity and faced the stigma of changing gender classification, except by awareness of God” (2013, Kugle).

While constructing Shari’a, jurists did not allow that a “real man” could be sexually attracted to another fully masculine man. Instead, they assumed one of the partners was essentially, a woman. “Either one partner was male-but-not-yet-fully-man (a boy or youth) or one was male-but-acting-as-woman (a man who accepted penetration in sexual intercourse)” (2013, Kugle). Transgender identity was not accounted for, but instead was attributed to assumed heterosexual roles in homosexual couplings. Jurists attributed feminine behavior in men to the “passive role” of receiver in homosexual male couplings and masculine behavior in woman as an assertion of the “active role” of penetrator in homosexual female couplings.

LGBT+ IN MOROCCAN LAW

HOMOSEXUALITY. Not only is there variation in how the Qur’an and hadith are interpreted by different doctrines of Islam, but there is also a variation between the laws of the religious doctrines and the laws of the nations that subscribe to them. The Moroccan Islam is that of the Maliki school of jurisprudence, which differentiates between the active and passive sexual partners. The Moroccan government also makes a point of differentiating between the active and passive partners, defining a homosexual a man who lets himself be penetrated by another man. However, differences exist when it comes to punishment. The Maliki school prescribes death to the active (penetrating) partner and a chance to repent for the passive (receiving) partner. This differs from Article 489 of the Moroccan Penal Code which criminalizes “lewd or unnatural acts

with an individual of the same sex,” for which the punishment is 6 months to 3 years in prison and a fine of 120-1200 dirhams (1962, Moroccan Government).

In practice, the people who are charged under Article 489 are almost always men. LGBT+ women in Morocco are less likely to face legal persecution. This is likely because female sexuality is perceived as nonexistent or unimportant and is ignored. A sign of this is that in Moroccan Arabic, there is no word for “lesbian” or “clitoris” (2017, Dialmy). In 2016, the first and only case thus far of women being charged under Article 489 occurred. On October 27, 2016, two girls, ages 16 and 17, were arrested and charged under Article 489 of the Penal Code, after being spotted kissing on a rooftop. The girls were represented by two attorneys from the Free Feminist Union (UFL). The union explained that a family member of one of the two girls took them to the police station, where they were immediately arrested (2016b, Stewart). Nidal Azhary, president of the UFL explained that the girls were being held under deplorable conditions. The arrest drew the attention of LGBT+ Moroccan collectives and the international community, sparking a social media campaign by All Out. The Aswat Collective and the Akaliyat organization gathered over 85,000 signatures on a petition to drop charges against the girls (2016, Benslimane). They were released on bail on November 3rd and the charges were dismissed on December 9th (2016a, Stewart). In cases like these, where charges are dismissed, LGBT+ Moroccans still face serious ramifications. Arrests under Article 489 can result in a person’s name being publicized, which could subsequently result in the loss of a job, the “outing” of a LGBT+ person to one’s family, and other social ramifications. The criminal status of homosexuality in Morocco also reinforces the belief that homosexuality is immoral and deserving of punishment, which only serves to support social prejudice.

The prosecution of LGBT+ Moroccans also extends beyond the Moroccan Penal Code. Moroccan schools are required to teach a curriculum that “emphasizes the danger and depravity of unnatural acts” (2017, Dialmy). Additionally, on March 21st, 2008 the Ministry of Interior stated, Morocco must “preserve citizens’ ethics and defend our society against all irresponsible actions that mar our identity and culture.” This was yet another call to rejection of LGBT+ identity in Morocco, which some view as a sign of western decadence and immorality. Morocco also opposed a UN resolution that would have formally condemned discriminatory anti-gay laws. Discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation or gender identity is not addressed in any Moroccan civil rights laws. Morocco also opposed the participation of an international Gay and Lesbian Rights Representative at the 2001 UN Conference on HIV-AIDS.

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY. Although there is no law which explicitly criminalizes transgender identity in Morocco, transgender people still face discrimination under Article 489, because dressing outside of the gender expectations associated with a person’s perceived gender can often be attributed to homosexual identity. In December of 2016, Police in Sidi Ali Ben Hamdouch, in the Meknes region of Morocco, police arrested three men for wearing “clothes that resemble those of women,” on charges of homosexuality (2016c, Stewart). Activists at the Akaliyat, which combats discrimination against sexual and religious minorities, denounced the arrests. The collective stated, “They were arrested on the street while they were walking during the religious festival that Sidi Ali Ben Hamdouch organizes every year to celebrate Aid Al Mawlid. They had rented a room like most visitors. They did not behave contrary to public decency or morals.” Police arrested the men for wearing clothes that were supposedly too feminine, which was read as a marker for gay identity. In addition to prosecution under Article

489, transgender people in Morocco are not permitted to legally change their names to match their gender, nor do they receive protection from the government against discrimination.

LGBT+ MUSLIMS AND ARABS IN MOROCCAN SOCIETY

HOMOSEXUALITY. On January 24th, 2007, the director of prevention programs for men who have sex with men of the Moroccan Association for the Fight Against AIDS (Association Marocaine de Lutte Contre le Sida, ALCS), stated, [translation] "There is no state protection" for homosexual Moroccans and [translation] Moroccan society is still largely homophobic" (2007, Immigration and Refugee). He also explained that many gay people "keep their homosexuality to themselves," and those who choose to come out are often "rejected" by their friends and family. He also explained, Moroccan society does not even "suspect" that lesbians exist. On January 23rd, 2007, the President of ALSC stated that even though homosexuality is common in Morocco, it is stigmatized. An article in the Moroccan daily *Aujourd'hui le Maroc* on June 11th, 2004 stated that [translation] "homosexuality in Morocco is tolerated behind closed doors but repressed in public."

TRANSGENDER IDENTITY. From the 1950's to the 1970's in Casablanca, Morocco, a French born Gynecologist Georges Burou established surgical procedures that served as the prototype for the current Genital/Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS) or even Gender Confirming Surgery (GCS) (2017, Bowers). After his death, this practice stopped. Today, Noor Talbi, a transgender woman who lives in Casablanca, is the most famous belly dancer in Morocco. Noor has avoided prosecution by the government, likely because of her social status

and her complete refusal to participate in activist efforts. In an interview with SF Gate she explains that she hung up the phone when she was contacted by activists (2014, Associated Press). Her fans for the most part ignore her identity or else acknowledge it as acceptable simply because she is a performer. Still, Moroccan State television refuses to put her on air and she is unable to obtain identification which corresponds to her gender.

LGBT+ IN WESTERN PORTRAYALS OF THE ARAB AND MUSLIM WORLD

Now that I have discussed how LGBT+ people are perceived according to Islam, Moroccan law, and Moroccan society, it is important to consider my own position as an outsider and to consider how other white, western, members of the LGBT+ community have portrayed LGBT+ people in the Arab and Muslim world. In “Reorienting Desire: The Gay International in the Arab World,” Joseph Massad describes how international gay rights organizations run by western, white males are eager to defend the rights of gays and lesbians on a global scale, but they have a missionary task, seeking to save gay and lesbian Arabs. Massad refers to the people that run these organizations and participate in this discourse that produces missionary tasks as the Gay International. He explains that the Gay International has produced two types of literature on the Arab and Muslim world. The first is academic literature which seeks to unravel the mystery of Islam to a western audience by offering a European or American gay male scholar’s explanation of homosexuality in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The second seeks to inform white, gay sex-tourists about the region by offering journalistic accounts of the lives of gays and some lesbians in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds. Overall, the goal is to liberate Arab and Muslim gays and lesbians from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming

them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay. John Boswell brought forth a debate about the Muslim world when he offered the unsupported assertion that “most Muslim societies have treated homosexuality with indifference, if not admiration,” likely based on centuries of Christian portrayals of the Muslim world as immoral and sexually depraved. Eventually, western scholars realized that this was not the case and Jeffrey Weeks concluded that the present Muslim world is undergoing transformation. He concluded that Muslim society will either become increasingly western or else will become increasingly under the sway of a new religious militancy. This type of neocolonial discourse, which emerges during calls to liberation on the part of the gay international is incredibly irresponsible and has less than liberating effects. This rhetoric silences LGBT+ Muslims and Arabs and perpetuates harmful, orientalist prejudices.

METHODOLOGY

POSITIONALITY AND ASSUMPTIONS

When carrying out this research, my primary concern was addressing my own biases, assumptions, and positionality as well as assuring the comfort and safety of my interviewees. As I mentioned in the previous section, there have been many examples of white, western, gay people who have produced literature about LGBT+ people in the Arab world that was based on assumptions and reproduced harmful stereotypes. It was important for me when conducting this study to engage with the members of the LGBT+ community in Morocco as my friends and peers, rather than as “subjects.” My goal was to have meaningful conversations, learn about their experiences, and respect to their personal and activist projects in my work. In this study, I cannot and will not claim to represent the entire LGBT+ community in Morocco through the stories of only two people. There are thousands of other LGBT+ Moroccans, every one of whom has navigated their identities in a unique way. I hope that by sharing these stories, I can shed some light on some of the nuances of what it means to engage with one’s identity as both Moroccan and LGBT+.

When I began my research, I thought that it would be incredibly challenging to find members of the LGBT+ community that would be willing to speak to me. Coming from Portland, OR in the United States, I was only used to experiencing the LGBT+ community as a very visible group that could be found at explicitly advertised LGBT+ events and bars. Having not seen this type of community in my first few months in Morocco, I falsely assumed that no community existed. Also, because I chose to conceal my own LGBT+ identity while in Morocco, I likely projected my own feelings of isolation onto the community I sought to study. I later

learned that, while the LGBT+ community in Morocco is not identical to that of the United States, it is very vibrant and present. It is also very visible once you take the time to learn the forms it takes and to look for it. I was also blinded by my monolithic interpretation of what it means to be a Moroccan. Living with a host family in the old medina of Rabat, where I ate couscous every Friday and bathed at the *hammam* (public baths), I had only experienced and learned about a very traditional, conservative side of Morocco. I somehow failed to see some of the many variations of Moroccan identity that existed right in front of my eyes. It was only once I started meeting with members of the LGBT+ community that I started to see how many colors of Moroccan identity there are.

During my research, I was very intentional about constantly assessing and reassessing my position as a white, American woman and the power dynamic that creates when I conduct interviews. I knew that while carrying out this research, I did not want to give any interviewees false hopes about the outcome of this project. Instead of creating lofty goals of social change and action prompted by this essay, I simply tried to gain a better understanding of the lives of the LGBT+ individuals who I interviewed. I hope this paper can contribute to the work that has already been produced surrounding topics of sexuality, Islam, and migration, focusing specifically on what this means in the context of Morocco. I also hope that this essay can honor the important work that the LGBT+ community in Morocco is doing to create safe spaces and increase acceptance in Moroccan society. In addition, I would take this opportunity to highlight the stories of two people who have inspired me with their courage and authenticity.

METHODS

I conducted this study in Rabat, Morocco, where I carried out two 40- and 90-minute semi-structured interviews over four weeks. The two semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the LGBT+ Moroccan community and were essentially open conversations with a few guiding questions. The interviews were conducted in English at cafes selected by the interviewees. I allowed the interviewees to choose the location of the interview, because I knew they would be sharing personal stories that both for their privacy and safety it would be best to discuss in a place where they felt safe speaking openly. In these interviews, I sought to learn about my interviewees' life stories, their experiences being openly LGBT+ in Morocco, their relationship with the LGBT+ community in Morocco, and their intentions to or not to migrate. At the beginning of each interview, I presented the interviewees with a brief overview of my research topic and the purpose of my project. I also explained that participation in the study was completely voluntary and they could choose to skip questions, stop the interview, or withdraw responses at any time. I also explained the reasons why I was interested in this topic and disclosed my own LGBT+ identity. I chose to disclose this information because this was the most honest way to explain why this research is important to me and it offered some clarity about my positionality as a researcher. I also offered interviewees the chance to ask me questions at the beginning and end of the interview. I strongly encouraged interviewees to remain anonymous and to select a pseudonym in order to protect their privacy and safety. One of the interviewees opted to use her real name in the study, the other is using a pseudonym.

I also conducted a brief, 15-minute structured, informational phone interview with the Ambassador of Amsterdam Gay Pride, where I asked her six questions and she offered concise answers to each. Because of scheduling issues and extenuating circumstances, this interview was

shorter than I would have liked and I was unfortunately unable to record it, so I could not use many direct quotes. However, I was still able to meet my goal of learning a little bit about the general experiences, issues faced, and triumphs of the LGBT+ Moroccan community in the Netherlands. My research also involved analysis of some of the relevant literature that has been produced surrounding the related subjects of LGBT+ identity and Islam; LGBT+ identity in Moroccan society and law; Moroccan migration; and LGBT+ Moroccans abroad.

LIMITATIONS

Two of the major limitations of my research were the short duration of the research period and the language barrier. Only working for four weeks on this project left little time to meet LGBT+ people and conduct follow up interviews. There were some LGBT+ people that I met briefly, but did not have the time to conduct formal interviews with. I also would have liked to engage more with the Moroccan LGBT+ community on social media. This leads me to the second limitation. I am not proficient enough in Moroccan Arabic, French, or Dutch to conduct this type of interview, so I conducted the interviews in English. Fortunately, the people that I met with were willing and able to speak in English during our interviews. I chose not to hire a translator due to the sensitive nature of the work that I was doing. The safety of my interviewees was of the utmost concern during my research, so I also wanted to be certain that interviewees could remain anonymous if they chose and the only way I could do that was by avoiding bringing other people into these conversations as mediators. Proficiency in these other languages would also have allowed me to conduct more interviews and to understand more of the activism that is occurring on social media.

ANALYSIS

LGBT+ IN MOROCCO

COMING OUT. In general, coming out to friends, family, and others is an incredibly personal decision that is challenging, if not impossible for many members of the LGBT+ community worldwide. In Morocco, due to religious, legal, and social pressures and ramifications, the decision to come out carries tremendous weight. My interviewees had very different coming out stories, but each has been accepted at least somewhat, by most members of their immediate families. At the same time, in both cases, one male family member ignores or rejects their identity.

Before coming out, Hajar tried to reject her lesbian identity. After her father passed away, she was working in Saudi Arabia to earn money for school. She said, “I was a deeply religious person and I wanted to fix myself. I wanted to change. I couldn’t stand being a lesbian. So, I asked a lot of people online and the only response I got is to get married and have children and maybe you’ll forget about your homosexual thoughts. So, I got married and I got pregnant.” After experiencing abuse and a resulting miscarriage, she returned to Morocco and started coming out, first to her mother and then in a Facebook post. In her immediate family, most are at least somewhat understanding, except her oldest brother. She explains, “We’re not speaking because of my post and my writings online.” Her extended family is also not speaking to her. She said, “It’s really hard. I miss them. Just because I was born this way they stopped talking to me.” She received very negative comments and threats in response to her Facebook post, but she decided, “I will take it to the next step because I’m not afraid anymore” and posted a viral YouTube video that caused controversy in Morocco and established her as a public figure.

For Hamza, coming out also involved a YouTube video, but rather than producing one, he stumbled upon a recommended video with a title something along the lines of, “How I Discovered I’m Trans.” He said it was then that he finally found words to describe how he felt. After taking time to process this, he admitted to his mother, “I feel stuck in a body that’s not mine.” He explained, “At that time I was very feminine, very you know, small and stuff. You could see that there was something pulling me down, not letting me be myself.” He explains that when he was a child, he was not conscious of gender. Then, when he started growing up, he became a tomboy, but around age 12, his mother started putting some pressure on him, saying, “I think you’ve got to start being a girl like your big sister.” He explains that he understands now that at that point she had all the pressure of the society on her shoulders, because he was still unaware of those societal pressures. Like Hajar, he tried to reject his identity. He said, “I started putting pressure on myself and trying to fit in that gender role, purely female. I was such a weird female. I was wrong with myself. The way that I felt was wrong. I was sending vibes of feeling wrong.” After about a year, he went back to his tomboy style and started to realize he was attracted to girls. He did not intentionally come out to his mother, but she found conversations on his computer and confronted him, telling him he needed to see a doctor. So, he went to a psychological coach and after five or six sessions, they called his mother and said, Hamza was doing just fine and was a healthy, balanced, person. Later, when Hamza came out to her as transgender, she supported him and encouraged him to receive support from therapists. Hamza explains, “[My mom] was the first person who knew about it and she was supporting me all the way. It was hard for her and for me at some points, because she was used to treating me certain way and she needed to change all of that and start treating me another way. It was hard, but we made it happen and now it’s going very good.” He says his sister is also very supportive, it took

her just two or three months to get used to using the correct pronouns. He also did not have any problems with his brother. His father however has not accepted him. He said, “I still get misgendered by him and the fact that he misgenders me makes my mom make mistakes when she’s talking... But, it’s taking him time. It took him five years to start accepting this, but still we’re on our way and I’m very optimistic about it and I’m sure he’s working on it. Because, he’s like, very Moroccan.” I asked what he meant by this and he explained that his dad is religious. He also said, “He is someone who made his life happen... I was expecting him to understand that you can go from nothing to something. But, it was hard.” Interestingly, his father’s side of the family calls him “Moulay Hamza.” This word is like the terms “sir” or “lord” in English. He said, his grandmother on his father’s side is more accepting than his father. Hamza also came out on social media, over time changing the letters in his birth name to form the male version of the same name.

DISCRIMINATION AND PROSECUTION. Both social and legal persecution are very real threats for Hamza and Hajar. For Hamza, there is always a threat of social persecution in public spaces. He said, “People just stare at me and if you stare too long you could get into a fight. I don’t have time to get into that type of situation. But the fear of getting into a fight is there 24/7.” He once almost got into a fight in which a guy around his age said, “Go away from here!” To which Hamza responded, “Is this your land? What’re you talking about?” Then the other man said, “Yes! This is the land of the *real Moroccan men*.” In this case, attempts at violence were provoked by concerns about masculinity and who is allowed to perform masculinity in Moroccan society. Hamza also is not legally able to change the gender on his government issued identification. When he shows his identification, he explains that it is just a

mistake in his papers and people tell him, “You need to fix that mistake on your paper, it’s going to bring a lot of problems.” He says, “Yeah, but you know the Moroccan system is very hard to deal with” and people drop the issue there. This still presents the possibility of negative interactions or confrontation.

For Hajar, due to her position in the public sphere as an LGBT+ activist, she faces the threat of government prosecution. She stated, “Legally, I could face a *lot* of problems. I have said a lot of problems that could take me to jail or court. I am not afraid of it because I know at some point I will go to jail. I’m waiting for this. If it’s just for three years... I’m good with that. More readings, more writings to do.”

COMMUNITY AND ACTIVISM. Activists are working to protect members of the community from legal prosecution and are forming safe spaces for their community. One such activist, Hajar Moutaouakil, became a prominent figure in the LGBT+ community after posting a YouTube video on the Moroccan National Human Rights Day in 2015. She explained, “I didn’t mention homosexuality or lesbianism or anything. I just called for love and tolerance on the National Human Rights Day and that caused some problems.” She recalled that not all, but most of the responses to the video were negative and she received death threats. However, after the video went viral, Hajar received thousands of followers. Now, she works with the collective, *Akaliyat*, which stands against criminalization of and discrimination against sexual, religious, and cultural minorities including LGBT+, Atheists, Shias, Christians, and Amazigh.² She also participates in activism through social media and is writing a popular online autobiography

² Amazigh are an ethnic group indigenous to Morocco

written in Moroccan Arabic. She explained, “I wrote it in Moroccan dialect not just to get in touch with a lot of people, but [because] I wanted to touch their hearts, because it’s not very often you read something in Moroccan dialect.” Hajar explains that the LGBT+ community in Morocco is becoming more powerful, “We have a stronger and more vocal community now.” She attributes some of this to social media, which has served as a platform for the LGBT+ community to come out, speak up, and unite. She said, “It’s our only strong tool to communicate to the people in charge and we thought if we didn’t change anything at least they will hear us and they will know we exist.” Social media has also acted as a unifier for the LGBT+ community by allowing them to create Facebook groups and identify cafes where LGBT+ people can go to be around other members of the LGBT+ community. Hajar told me the biggest group she knows of has 4,000 members and the smallest is around 400. She explained, “If we see a great café for us, like a culture café, it’s perfect for us—for the LGBT [community] for all minorities—to come here. We used to have stand-up comedians and people to sing from the LGBT [community] and after fights [with café management], we post ‘this is our new place to hang out,’ so after a few days you can see numerous people, couples. They come hangout. It’s filled with LGBT. You think you’re in maybe, Sweden. It’s really cool.” These transnational cafes serve as sort of safe spaces where LGBT+ people can gather, although fights with management often result in the expulsion of members of the LGBT+ community from the cafes. In Marrakech, where Hajar lives, there are also clubs and bars that are unofficially LGBT+. Hajar explained, “Marrakech is a more touristic city, so you have people from all around: from the U.S., from France, Europe, everything. So, they’re used to seeing LGBT, gay couples and lesbian couples all the time.” Even though Moroccans still face the same social, legal, and religious pressures in Marrakech,

because it is a tourist destination, there is slightly more room for a more visible LGBT+ community.

Hamza's involvement in the LGBT+ community has been on a more interpersonal level. He has found a group of LGBT+ friends but has only met a few transgender men. He has also had people reach out to him as a confidante. He said, "I've had a lot of people talk to me secretly about their life and I've tried to be their confidante, their safe space. As long as I can be a safe space for someone, I'm feeling good. I love helping people. If I could make a real, physical safe space for LGBT, I would be so so so happy."

THE FUTURE. In my interview with Hajar, I asked her what she would like to happen for the LGBT+ community in Morocco in the next 10 years. She told me, "In 10 years, I'd like us to not have penal code 489 and for the LGBT community to be stronger and maybe we can see couples all around, maybe in the street and maybe it's not a thing anymore to be shocked or to be afraid of. Maybe we could have our own cafes or bars and not get in trouble." Hajar is optimistic about the LGBT+ community in Morocco. She said, I think things are getting better, somehow. I'm optimistic. I think the LGBT [community] is more vocal, well, just in the media or Facebook. Hopefully it will be more vocal in offices and in schools." I asked Hajar about if she would ever seek asylum outside of Morocco. She told me, although she knows many people who have left Morocco, she is staying. She said, "I'd love to visit a lot of places and to show people who we are but I think I can't leave Morocco for good. I'm attached to Morocco and I think I still have a lot of work to do here. It's just the first dot of the line, we didn't do anything, we still have a lot to do."

For Hamza, leaving Morocco is the only way he can have access to hormones or surgery to complete his transition. He described his plans for Canada and explained that he eventually wants to return. He said, “I want to get my papers and change my name and all this stuff, build myself and come back to Morocco with enough power— and in this country power equals money— make some money, come back here and use that power for my people, my community. That’s my biggest dream, I wish I can do that.” I asked why he wanted to go to Canada and he explained, “I’ve always loved that country and I know that the infrastructure of the country is made to accept and take care of people like the LGBT community. People from the community have their own rights, they’re respected. If you get discriminated against you can go and you can tell someone about it and here I have no option, like, the only option is to hide or run away and I have to live my whole life hiding.” He went on to say it is difficult having some people know he is trans and some not and being unsure of how people will react. He said, “I have good relationships, but still. It’s scary to be here.” He started looking at the Canadian immigration website when he was younger and has wanted to go for a long time. Now, finally, he is only one month away from getting on a plane once his paperwork is fully processed. He will be going as a student, not an asylum seeker, because LGBT+ people cannot seek asylum from within Morocco. He said, “Even if I’m going to go the same as another student to get papers, I don’t mind. As long as I know I’m going to make it happen, that’s it. I’m good.” I asked if he would like to have people know that he is transgender in Canada and he responded, “I wish I was openly trans, because I’m so proud of being trans. I wasn’t, but now I am. I am very very proud of my purple color and I want to just— not shove it in everyone’s face— but you know show my color like, “Hey! I’m trans!” Ideally, my life would be me not having to hide anymore from people and not

having to shut my mouth because I could risk my life for my point of view. So, freedom of expression and freedom of being. That would be the perfect situation for me.”

LGBT+ MOROCCANS ABROAD

In this section, I focus on the Moroccan LGBT+ community in the Netherlands as just one example of the experiences of Moroccans LGBT+ who migrate to countries in the Global North. I chose to focus on the Netherlands, because it is the country with the sixth highest number of Moroccans outside of Morocco. Additionally, LGBT+ rights in the Netherlands are some of the most progressive in the world. The Netherlands legalized same-sex sexual activity in 1811 and in 2001, it became the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage.

An important continent-wide shift occurred in the last century in Europe as the migrant population became increasingly minoritarian (i.e. consisting of the so-called second and third generation, born and raised in their countries of residence, which in effect have become multi-ethnic and multi-religious) and issues of racism and xenophobia have become highly relevant to the topic of migration (2012, El-Tayeb). Until the 1980s, Western European perceptions of labor migration were shaped by the assumption that most migrants would ‘return home’ once they were no longer needed. Eventually, rather than acknowledging that for these generations of migrants Europe *is* home, policy and media debates focused on assessing how racialized minorities must assimilate before they can be considered European. They are perceived as belonging to cultures that are diametrically opposed to everything that Europe stands for and they these migrants are positioned as not properly European. A key example of this is the hijab, which has served as a symbol of Muslim difference, presenting Muslims and Europeans like oil

and water: unable to mix. The hijab has been claimed as a proof of women's oppression in Muslim communities. Western society positions the hijab as a threat to the western ideal of feminism, silencing Muslim women.

A large portion of the hate crimes committed against the LGBT+ community in Morocco are committed by Moroccan migrants and many are quick to place blame on Moroccan culture and Islam. However, this assessment ignores other important factors that are at play. One important factor is spatial politics, where marginalized groups are pushed to the edges of cities, but are not expelled, while at the same time are held captive and excluded based on their failure to achieve proper status as European (2012, El-Tayeb). In this gentrified space, the (implicitly white) gay community and (implicitly straight) Muslim community are pitted against each other as the gay-consumer citizens represent the successful integration of minorities into the mainstream, neoliberal society. While the postwar industrial societies needed unskilled migrant labor, the current society calls for migrant work in the service sector, which draws from a different pool of employees. This has resulted in the formation of a largely unemployed multi-ethnic underclass located in poor neighborhoods positioned directly adjacent to the factories where they were formerly employed. Rather than addressing this shift in demand, responsibility is shifted onto the migrants for "self-segregation" and "self-ghettoization" supposedly caused by their inferior and different culture. The migrants' concentration in these spaces presents them as an intentionally self-segregated group of invaders who threaten to destroy European values.

LGBT+ rights are claimed as a western ideal, meanwhile Arabs and Muslims are viewed as the threat to this ideal. This results in the erasure of the identity of LGBT+ Arabs and Muslims. In Judith Butler's, "Sex Politics, Torture, and Secular Time," she provides a theoretical framework for sex politics and migration within the context of Middle Eastern and Moroccan

migration to Europe. She offers the example of an aspect of the citizenship test in the Netherlands which involves showing a photo of two men kissing or two women kissing to migrants and asking them if this behavior is acceptable. Butler argues that this is simply a government's attempt at feigning modernity and suppressing the influx of Muslim immigrants, more specifically Moroccans and Turks. This problematically asserts the Netherlands as a homogenous society that accepts homosexuality, when, if conservatives within the Netherlands were shown the same photo, they would find it unacceptable. Butler asks, "Does the exam become the means for testing tolerance or does it carry out an assault against religious minorities, part of a broader effort on the part of the state to demand coercively that they rid themselves of their traditional religious beliefs and practices in order to gain entry into the Netherlands?" (2008, Butler). She argues that this tactic disguises itself as a liberal defense of freedom, but is in actuality more of an instrument of coercion, "one that seeks to keep Europe white, pure, and 'secular' in ways that do not interrogate the violence that underwrites that very project." This citizenship test also relies on the assumption that if a person is Moroccan they are necessarily homophobic and erases the identities of LGBT+ Moroccans.

It is assumed that one cannot be both Moroccan and LGBT+, so if a person possesses both identities, they are expected to disavow their Muslim identity to be "truly" LGBT+ and give thanks to their host country for graciously liberating them from the shackles of their inferior culture (2012, El-Tayeb). In my interview with Souad Boumediene, a Moroccan woman, activist, and the 2017 Ambassador of Amsterdam Pride, she explained that the Moroccan LGBT+ community is facing more pain from Islamophobia than homophobia (S. Boumediene, personal communication, May 5, 2017). Moroccan LGBT+ people are also delegitimized through the rhetoric that necessitates normative "coming out" narratives to be "properly gay" (2012, El-

Tayeb). The majority Dutch LGBT+ community views the traditional narrative of coming out to one's family and friends as a necessary step in achieving a proper LGBT+ identity, but for many members of the migrant/minority LGBT+ community, this is impossible. Boumedién explained that although some "come out" to their families, others never will (S. Boumedién, personal communication, May 5, 2017). Instead, many migrant/minority LGBT+ people live a double life so they do not bring shame onto their families within the community (2012, El-Tayeb). Still, this does not mean they are any more or less LGBT+ than those who come out in a traditional sense, and this delegitimizing rhetoric only serves to exclude migrant/minority LGBT+ people from the larger LGBT+ community. Still, the Boumedién states that the Moroccan LGBT+ community is doing well and has now had two Moroccan boats at the Amsterdam Canal Gay Pride.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research project was to answer the question: why might a member of the LGBT+ community choose to leave Morocco or stay and what challenges and triumphs await members of this community in each destination? Conservative interpretations of Islam contribute to the stigma surrounding LGBT+ identity, however Muslim scholars have offered interpretations of the Qur'an and hadith that make space for LGBT+ people as equals under the eyes of God. Islam has also informed the laws that are in place, including Article 489 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which criminalizes homosexual activity. This law is sporadically enforced but has serious consequences for members of the LGBT+ community in Morocco. Additionally, Moroccan LGBT+ people must fear rejection from their friends and family as well as discrimination and violence in the public sphere.

Still, LGBT+ Moroccans have made space for their identities in Moroccan society and are increasingly uniting and speaking up thanks to the efforts of coalitions, activists, and individuals. Activists have hope that Morocco will become increasingly accepting of LGBT+ people and are working hard to protect the community from persecution and to create both virtual and physical safe spaces. Some LGBT+ people still must migrate to live their lives authentically. For transgender Moroccans, the only way to transition using hormones or surgery or to obtain government issued identification that matches their gender is to leave the country. Countries like the Netherlands are progressive with regard to LGBT+ rights and are willing to accept migrants from Morocco, however, they participate in Islamophobic rhetoric, which silences the voices of LGBT+ Muslims and stereotypes Arabs and Muslims as outsiders. The Netherlands is certainly not the only country to be participating in this discourse. European

nations define themselves as humanistic, equal, and tolerant, but don't extend this towards Muslim immigrants. Please consider this a call to fulfill that promise.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The research presented in this study is not a comprehensive analysis of the topic. Further research should examine the situation of LGBT+ Moroccan migrants in other western countries besides the Netherlands. This research could also more extensively discuss the situation of LGBT+ Moroccans in their host countries. Further research could also examine how socioeconomic class influences the ways that LGBT+ people are treated in Morocco and how this impacts their decision to or not to migrate. It could also delve into the way the LGBT+ community in Morocco uses social media as a source of information about LGBT+ identity and a platform through which to come out and to organize. Further research could also benefit from interviews with more people in the Moroccan LGBT+ community or interviews that follow up with LGBT+ Moroccans who emigrate and their experiences.

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Interviews:

Boumediene, S. (2017, May 5). Phone interview by the author.

H. (2017, April 18). Personal interview by the author.

Moutaouakil, H. (2017, April 19). Personal interview by the author.

Appendix A

Informational Interview Questions for Souad Boumediene

1. What has been your role in Moroccan LGBT+ activism in the Netherlands?
2. In your opinion, what are the critical issues that currently face the Moroccan LGBT+ community in the Netherlands?
3. What triumphs have the Moroccan LGBT+ community made in the Netherlands in the last few years?
4. Do you feel like the needs/goals of the Moroccan LGBT+ community are supported by the LGBT+ community as a whole?
5. What is one piece of advice/information you might give to an LGBT+ Moroccan coming to the Netherlands?
6. Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any questions for me?