

Letter to Samra Habib:

A Critical Reflection

Alyx Beaudoin

Gender and Sexuality Studies – 2SLGBTQI+ Social Change History

Hilary Jahelka

University of Calgary

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Dear Samra,

My name is Alyx Beaudoin. I am a 22-year-old, pagan, non-binary student, living on Treaty 7 land. I am writing to you as a fellow queer person and as an individual who seeks to learn more about their place in this wild world we live within. In one of my courses this semester, Gender and Sexuality: 2SLGBTQ+ Social Change History, we read a section of your book *We Have Always Been Here*. I found myself resonating with your words and stories on a deeply personal level and sought to respond to them through our letter-writing assignment. Although the two of us contrast in many aspects of our personal identities and identifiers, I feel as though there are many parallel experiences that you and I have shared that are worth reflecting on and expanding upon. I want to disclaim that I, as a white and non-Muslim person, have absolutely no intention of claiming your nuanced and sensitive experiences as a queer Muslim. Rather, I want to share with you how providing such experiences has affected me as a reader, and thus possibly many more, through the battles of finding relationships and family, community, spirituality and so on. Your memoir has become very special to me as a thinking point and harbouring a deep respect for you. I want to thank you for publishing your thoughts and experiences, which allowed me to read and open up new streams of thought and avenues for self-reflection, as I know you love to evoke! (*Habib, n.d.*).

“He was nothing like the men I’d known growing up—men I was terrified of.” Is something you said to describe a previous lover named Alex (*2019, pg. 149*). It reminded me of a book we read in class by Vivek Shraya, I wonder if you’ve read it? It’s called *I’m Afraid of Men*. This short novel so succinctly touches on every topic in which women and queer people alike find themselves saying ‘men I was terrified of’ like yourself. And I so completely empathize.

Shraya writes to the ‘you’ of the book “Although my experience with men in the past had often resulted in the dismissal of my boundaries, which only made me fortify them more, your genuine respect for my boundaries allows me to let my guard down.” That idea of boundaries is one I think about constantly, especially when navigating new relationships. You and I share this need and desire to find an intimate partner with someone who, by inflicted or inherent circumstances, cannot hide within a hetero, cis or just normative lens (*Habib, 2019, pg. 154*). In my personal experience as a genderqueer person, I have found that within the gender-diverse community, there are better understandings of boundaries because we often have had them broken in so many ways just while trying to be our authentic selves. I have never minded dating cis (or ‘cis passing’) people, but I never wanted it to compromise a sense of overt queerness that we as a pairing could share. As queer people, we fight so hard to be seen and understood for our identities, and I would be contrite to return to a position that allows me to pass through people's heteronormative radars. I additionally identify with being grey asexual and grey aromantic, and as you can imagine—it makes dating difficult. But it also means that no matter the relationship I’m in, the dynamic we form (if forming a healthy relationship) is inherently queer, and I want said relationships to present as queer, too. Having a ‘cis passing’ relationship in any regard gives the dynamic certain social privileges and additional opportunities for greater gender-based violence and boundaries crossed to occur. I feel that before reading about your similar needs, I didn’t understand that particular nuance very thoroughly, just that I understood that I wanted queerness to be present without knowing a cause for *why*.

One of the biggest aspects we differ on is childhood family dynamics. I’m grateful to have been in a position where my decision to be unabashedly queer did not hurt my blood relatives’

opinions of me. Mind you, it wasn't without hard work and lots of communication (or fighting), but I still hold all my blood connections with little to no tension on the topic of my identity. I'm thus more grateful to have been raised by my family especially to feel confident in being my genuine self without shame to do so (even if I turned about a bit more eccentric than anticipated). Oftentimes, though, I catch my ignorance when engaging with friends of strictly religious or immigrant family histories who struggle day in and day out just to choose their path. In my liberated position, it feels like the easy option to denounce all obstacles, because that's what I did and with good results. I am privileged, racially, culturally and just to have been born to the parents I was, for I can claim the concept of sacrifice, but I never had to make it. I try actively to contrast that reality in healthy ways. I also have a chosen family or more than anything, I am incredibly dedicated to my role as the chosen family of my best friend, who wasn't born into such a family. Like you describe so succinctly "chosen families are a cornerstone of queer culture, especially for those whose biological families don't accept them" (*pg. 158*). I try to use this privilege as a place of support for those friends, to provide them a space of refuge, so that they can find a home, a family, that will treat them kindly because they are human; rather than any particular race, religion or class. I recognize my privilege and I understand that because of it, there are more privileges still that I fail to recognize. Every day I want to find a way to use it in a meaningful way, for people other than myself, I've benefited enough.

I wanted to discuss more on what you spoke about for language and speaking predominantly in a language that isn't native to you (*Habib, 2019, pg. 175*). As a language learner, I deeply resonate with the aspect of pursuing articulate thoughts and the deep struggles that come with it. My dad speaks English as a second language, without ever having taught me

his first, and I can tell that with each year he predominantly speaks English, the more capable he feels of expressing himself. The same is true for my partner who speaks Punjabi and desperately struggled in youth to adapt English into their life. They often feel stilted, like they cannot be their most genuine self with me. Being someone with language skills as a peak aspiration, I have been more than ecstatic to begin my Punjabi learning journey, for both our sakes. I want to be a translator in the future so that I can be the bridge of articulation for people. So that I can be a stepping stone for nuanced language to be portrayed as clearly as possible through the shift between syntaxes. Within our class, we talked a lot about the use of language itself and how it socially evolves to encompass or ostracize different elements of the community (*Jahelka, 2019*). Ultimately, language is a crucial aspect of interpersonal relationships especially intercultural ones. I believe what you described is somewhat of a universal experience for those who predominantly speak a second language and there needs to be more awareness and normalized accommodation around such.

I have done a similar dating app experiment to yours (*pg. 154*), when I lived in Beijing, and was thoroughly surprised to find the community that hid behind binary lenses. To be in an ideologically restrictive place and still be able to find community through dating app filters was incredible for me and finding comfort being so far from home. I was able to learn so much about Chinese queer communities and the perspectives of queer youths like me, who were totally unlike myself in terms of cultural, social and geographical upbringings. I am so thankful to have met Wawa, a non-binary individual who previously worked as an English translator, and never having left the People's Republic of China. They taught me that although the queer community is not as overt as many of its Western counterparts, it's still very much thriving, similar to that of

finding queer Muslim mosques: all that matters is knowing where to look (*pg. 163*). Even still, I want to further reflect on the struggle you experience in queer spaces to find faces and people similar to yourself (*pg 178*). I feel that many people forget that diversity in a community doesn't mean that you have checked every box at least once, but that the community has a space for everyone to see themselves in another person. People deserve to feel like part of a whole, rather than a checkbox to a system. "Our Past Matters" (*Allen, 2018*) Is a book that uncovers the realities of Calgary's (my hometown's) own queer community, and finding it in places where you least expect it. It makes me understand that seemingly all queer communities have this *speakeasy* sort of aspect within them. More than anything, it leads me to consider that we as social activists should be searching harder for these niche communities if we wish to have accurate representations of diversity within queer activist fields.

With similar understandings of community, I appreciate being able to witness communities that are their own without trying to personally fulfill unnecessary roles within them. It is beautiful to see a community grow naturally without the encouragement of outside sources, even if covert. That said, no community lacks intersections. You described some of your internal struggles, "But for most of my twenties, Islam felt like a parent dishing out conditional love: I had no right to call myself Muslim because I'm queer and don't wear the hijab" (*Habib, 2019, pg. 165*). Ahmad-Chan discusses parts of her work and life: "In addition to feeling a deep connection with many of the women I spoke with, I was confronted by my own privilege during these interviews." (*2020*) her choice to not wear hijab lends her a feeling of disconnect to Muslim culture. Her initial reason to stop wearing her hijab was over a crisis of faith, but the impact she felt for her to wear it again was her sense of community. Although in this way you two could be described as having somewhat opposite journeys, I can see how you each connect

to your communities; through your identity-defining experiences with Islam and the act of wearing hijab. Finding community *within* an existing community can be its own struggle due to intercultural nuances.

I appreciate you for allowing me the space in your writing to have such foundational thoughts. I think I have a better understanding of my intersections, and in what ways they make me one whole being. Being able to read of your life, with your own self-reflection weaved through was an incredible opportunity to understand how my personal facets are sewn together. One of the things I hoped to get most out of this course I am writing for was an understanding of community within our city. With recent endeavours, self-exploration and reading your memoir, I think I've grown to better understand not just the community but how I fit into it as well. A community is made up of individuals and it becomes more and more evident that the actions and thoughts of the individual impact the community in larger ways than one might anticipate. Through finding relationships and the ways that I can efficiently communicate within them, there are minute social changes that can be made by every person to create a more understanding and holistic society. As much as changes should and must be made as a collective, studying you in this course has taught me to be aware of my singular position as a piece of a whole. Thank you for this opportunity to understand my space and place with deeper clarity.

Sincerely and with much love,
Alyx

Citations:

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