

# Queering archives of photography

## *Imperialism, homoeroticism and desire in Middle Eastern contemporary art*

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*In this article, I historicize same-sex desire in the Middle East, across North Africa, and the regions formerly a part of the Ottoman Empire, to better investigate Middle Eastern contemporary art and its relationship to colonial discourses on gender that had an impact on same-sex desire. I begin by historicizing European and colonial encounters in the Middle East at the turn of the century, illustrating the effect Victorian sensibilities had on pre-modern homosociality and same-sex desire in the Middle East. This history of changing sexual discourse is later illustrated through European colonial photographs in the Middle East that depict homoeroticism, with a primary focus on European travellers who photographed local young men. I analyse the aesthetics of these photographic archives in relation to contemporary drawings by Iranian artist Ebrin Bagheri, as a way of investigating the modernist production of heterosexuality and the erasure of local gender norms. In analysing the art of a queer diasporic subject, I focus on the ways in which Bagheri's contemporary drawings bring together traces of pre-modern same-sex desire to elucidate that the colonial hangovers of the colonized local sexual scripts are still alive, and deeply embedded within diaspora consciousness. The double bind that the queer diasporic subject often faces can be linked to these after-effects and tensions, and the study of visual art and culture illustrates the specific ways these sexual scripts are both manifested and negotiated by non-Western subjects in the West. Importantly, this analysis is meant to challenge the Eurocentrism of dominant queer theory and gay scholarship by focusing on alternative sexual discourses that are not reducible to hegemonic Euro-American notions of gay identity. My analysis of historic colonial encounters in relation to contemporary diasporic art becomes another logic used to challenge both area-studies scholarship that remains too nation-centric, and the homogeneity of 'global gay identity', by addressing how colonial encounters have been transformed and negotiated in local sites.*

Keywords: photography, Middle East, contemporary art, Islamicate, archives, gender, homosexuality, queer, visual culture, postcolonial

## Histories of (colonial) photography in the Middle East

A crucial link between the history of photography and Europe's knowledge about the Middle East has existed since the invention of the daguerreotype in 1839 (Behdad and Gartlan 2013). When Louis-Jacques-Mandé-Daguerre introduced his invention to the Chambre des députés in France, politician, mathematician and physicist Dominique François Arago (1980:17) commented upon 'the extraordinary advantages that could have been derived from so exact and rapid a means of reproduction during the expedition to Egypt', and recommended that the Institut d'Égypte be equipped immediately with the new visual technology. In subsequent decades many European photographers followed Arago's suggestion and, with the support of various governmental institutions, photographers travelled to the Middle East to amass portfolios of Egyptian antiquity and the sites of the Holy Lands, making the region one of the principal training grounds for the early practice of photography, partly due to the abundance of natural sunlight (Behdad and Gartlan 2013:1). This link between photography and the Middle East is likewise seen with Daguerre's British counterpart, William Henry Fox Talbot, who invented the salted paper and calotype photographic processes. In 1846 Talbot published a pamphlet entitled 'The Talbotype applied to hieroglyphics', which was distributed among archaeologists and orientalist scholars (Perez 1988:15).

The dominant historiography understands photography as a Western import into Eastern lands. Historians of photography have generally assigned only marginal importance to the Middle East in the works of the many European photographers in the nineteenth century, and even less importance to the various traditions of indigenous photography that emerged in the region soon after the introduction of the daguerreotype in 1839 (Behdad and Gartlan 2013:1). Currently, the study of photography in the Middle East is not focused on indigenous photography,<sup>1</sup> but rather on historiographies of European photographers traveling to the Middle East on imperialist adventures during a period of colonial expansion. These European photographers and photography studios that dominate the history of Middle Eastern photography include Le Gray, Du Camp, Salzmann, the works of Tancred Dumas, Francis Frith, Felice Beato, Emile Bécard, Hippolyte Arnoux and Alexandre Leroux; as well as Maison Bonfils, Maison Lehnert & Landrock, Maison Garrigues, Photoglob Zurich, and Underwood and Underwood. Tellingly, these photographers and studios still define the imagery and historical narrative of photography in the Middle East. So, how does one study, interpret and read the visual imagery of Middle Eastern photography from local photographers and artists? In his detailed study of Middle Eastern portrait photography, *The Arab Imago: A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910*, historian Stephen Sheehi argues that asking how Middle Eastern photography is really different, only re-inscribes the binaries of the dominant

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1 For scholars trying to fill this gap, please see Ritter and Scheiwiller 2018.

historical narrative of Middle Eastern photography (2016:xxi). Cultural difference, and arguably Western exceptionalism, is maintained if photography from 'Eastern lands' is distinct from the Western master image. Rather than strictly analysing the subject matter of the image itself, Orientalism's asymmetries of power need to be read as part of the photographic image as much as of the subject matter.<sup>2</sup> The clear divide between European photographers in the Middle East versus local photographers in the Middle East is indicative of the Western exceptionalism that maintains this Eurocentric master narrative and disenfranchizes Arabs from proprietorship of the universalizing power of photography.<sup>3</sup>

Just as histories of colonialism cannot be separated from histories of art, the past three decades have seen an emergence of Western scholars interested in the representations of sexuality in the Arab and Muslim worlds, coinciding with the emergence of Western gay scholarship on sexuality (Massad 2002:365). Arab scholar Joseph Massad critiques what he terms the 'Gay International', a mission of homo-colonialism and Western exceptionalism that seeks to export Western models of homosexuality to places it did not previously exist, effectively erasing local scripts of sexual identity. It is important to understand the 'Gay International' in relation to the rise of Islamicate<sup>4</sup> sexuality studies within the context of imperialism, and its coincidence with the emergence of Western gay sexuality studies. This needs to be examined in relation to Western exceptionalism and the dominant (Euro-American) discourse on gay identity in the Middle East which contends that homosexuality is hated, foreign and not tolerated.<sup>5</sup>

2 Orientalism is defined as the West's patronizing representations of 'The East' and the overall exoticization of the societies and peoples who inhabit countries in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. According to Said (1978), Orientalism is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies who produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and central to power.

3 This summary of photography in the Middle East is expanded upon as a case study in Gayed and Angus 2018.

4 In 1974, Marshall Hodgson coined the term Islamicate as a way of opening up the borders posed by modern scholarship. Hodgson identifies the issue in using the term Islam and Islamic in unspecific ways, arguing that the more we speak of Islamic art, literature or sexuality, the less we actually speak about Islam as a faith. The Islamicate does not refer directly to the religion of Islam itself, but to the social and cultural complexities historically associated with Islam. It is also inclusive of non-Muslims living within the same regions. Geographically, it also opens up the limits of only studying places such as 'Middle East', and encompasses other geographic regions where Islam is dominant both religiously and culturally, such as Iran and parts of Asia (Hodgson 1974:57–9).

5 An example of antiquated human rights arguments are those made by Brian Whitaker in his book *Unspeakable Love, Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (2011). While outlining key issues in Middle Eastern sexuality studies through interviews and first-hand accounts, Whitaker takes a human rights stance that dichotomizes sexuality discourses

Yet, as this analysis of visual art and archival research will show, queerness finds a way to dwell and remain in these seemingly ‘inhospitable’ places like the Middle East and North Africa. It begs the question: who defines queer hospitality? The answer, of course, is Western queerness and its unquestionable authenticity. This in turn is reified by canonical texts like Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1990a) in the way it becomes an axiomatic work on all histories of sexuality across all geographic periods, rather than only being a limited study on sexuality discourses in Western Europe. In this article, I avoid discussing queerness in terms of global-to-local, and instead make historical connections to the contemporary diaspora in order to see how the local subject speaks to queerness. This method avoids ‘importing’ notions of queerness where it did not previously exist, and instead examines the ways in which same-sex desires exist freely and locally by populations in the Middle East and the diaspora. With scholars arguing that queer identity is an inherently Western construct,<sup>6</sup> what would an analysis of same-sex discourses of the Global South look like if we do not speak of queer at all? What would a study of same-sex desire in the Middle East look like if we change our assumptions, and instead do local-to-local historiographies more productively? What could a trans-local approach contribute to the study of homosexual discourse in the Middle East, and the relationship queerness has with colonial histories of imperial expansion? While I attempt to address some of these concerns within this article, these questions are important to challenge gay-international discourses and to avoid a reproduction of colonial and imperial logics under a harmful universalist framework of human rights, gay liberation, and sexual freedoms that only mirror a Euro-American model.

There is a site of productive tension in questioning the use and non-use of ‘queerness’ as a marker of non-Western-centric desire. A main issue surrounding this contention is that scholars of Islamicate same-sex desires have outlined that a stable gay identity did not exist prior to the modern period and that it is in fact a Western concept of subjectivity. To use queer in an analysis of historical desire in the Global South would then be inaccurate. While scholars like Joseph Massad contend that contemporary queer identification in the Middle East stems from colonialism, scholars like Samar Habib (2010:xvii) deny Massad’s protest against the view that there is an authentic form of homosexual identity indigenous to the Arab World.

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into Western categories of identification, namely a Euro-American universalism and that of the Other. This othering of the sexual discourses that do not resemble that of Western homosexuality is one of the pitfalls this universalist human rights methodology creates.

- 6 For instance, in Khaled El- Rouayheb’s study (2005), *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800*, he outlines the overwhelmingly numerous amount of biographic accounts, poetic anthologies and belletrist writings that are openly dedicated to same-sex relations. However, he criticizes modern historians for presuming these instances to be manifestations of ‘homosexuality’ and urges more temporally and locally specific readings of these same-sex relations.

Habib rejects Massad's assertion that coming-out and visibility strategies are Western imports and colonial impositions, labelling this as oppressive to Arab individuals who do in fact identify as gay and still live in the Middle East. As the terminology of 'queer' becomes contentious in post-colonial contexts, the productive tension I wish to draw upon lies in the contrapuntal study of historic and contemporary art. That is, questioning how queer is identified in one context and disidentified in another, all while analysing pre-modern same-sex desire in relation to a contemporary queer artist. Then, the conceptual discussion I would like to have is about pushing back against a hegemonic gay Western identity in the usage of the term 'queer', and about instead imagining other ways of discussing same-sex and homoerotic desire.

Instead, I historicize same-sex desire in the Middle East, across North Africa, and the regions formerly a part of the Ottoman Empire to better investigate Middle Eastern contemporary art, and its relationship to colonial discourses on gender that have had an impact on same-sex desire.<sup>7</sup> I begin with European and colonial encounters in the Middle East at the turn of the century, illustrating the effect Victorian sensibilities had on pre-modern homosociality and same-sex desire in the Middle East. This history of changing sexual discourse is later illustrated through European colonial photographs in the Middle East that depict homoeroticism, primarily focusing on European travellers who photographed local young men. I analyse the aesthetics of these photographic archives in relation to contemporary drawings by Iranian artist Ebrin Bagheri as a way of investigating the modernist production of heterosexuality through the lens of gender, and its' reconceptualization from local gender norms before increased contact with Europe in the sixteenth century. In exploring the art of a queer diasporic subject, I focus on the ways in which Bagheri's contemporary drawings carry traces of pre-modern same-sex desire, to highlight that the hangovers of colonized local sexual scripts are still alive, and how they are deeply embedded within diaspora consciousnesses. The double bind that the queer diasporic subject often faces can be linked to these after-effects and tensions. Photography in the Middle East can be used to excavate the image of gender, the changing sexual discourses within the archive, and the visualized homoeroticism of a local population. To push this further, I argue that photography in the Middle East during colonial periods can also provide a useful link for understanding the contemporary diaspora's relationship to their own locally relevant – in Bagheri's case, Persian – history. Photography then acts as a tool that links these colonial histories to the contemporary moment, giving better insight into how the diaspora experiences

7 I define the Middle East loosely as the geopolitical designation of western Asia and north-east Africa that includes the nations on the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. Even though some of these regions, like Iran and Turkey, are not technically a part of the Middle East, my emphases on historiography makes it integral to include regions that were connected by empire, culture, and language.

their sexuality. This removes value judgments of modernity,<sup>8</sup> progress, and social acceptance from the discussion, and instead provides an analysis that is rooted in historical causality and seeks to find the cause-and-effect relationships between colonial histories in the Middle East and the current queer diaspora.

Importantly, this analysis is meant to challenge the Eurocentrism of dominant queer theory and gay scholarship by focusing on alternative sexual discourses that are not reducible to hegemonic Euro-American notions of gay identity. My analysis of historical colonial encounter in relation to contemporary diasporic art becomes another logic used to challenge area-studies scholarship that remains too nation-centric. Simultaneously, it challenges the homogeneity of 'global gay identity' by addressing the way the colonial encounter has been transformed and negotiated in local sites.

### **Photographic archives: excavating colonial trauma**

Through Bagheri's use of historic cultural tropes that are not only Iranian, but part of many geo-cultural traditions across the Ottoman Empire, I uncover the trappings of colonial history that are embedded within the artist's diaspora consciousness. The connections I make within this analysis are not those made by the artist. Archival research is not part of Bagheri's practice, and he has confirmed that he has not actually seen the archives considered by my study while producing his work. Therefore, I ask: what does it mean for Bagheri to produce drawings that visually echo photographs he has never seen? How can this speak to the power of photography as a tool for excavating and locating colonial histories? What type of excavation can be accomplished by studying historical archives in tandem with contemporary art? The ubiquity of photographs makes them perfectly suited to be something that 'is not seen' but which is somehow always present, manifesting themselves at the core of identity formation and narratives of sexual desire.<sup>9</sup> It is my contention that artwork such as Bagheri's

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8 I conceptualize 'the pre-modern' as a time period before the turn of the century, and prior to the period of modernity as defined by the West. Pre-modern histories in the Global South signal a period prior to one that has been characterized by Western Modernity as the pinnacle of the advancement of modern industrial societies and social progress. Conceptually, I anchor this term in relation to an Islamicate pre-modern history that is not geographically specific, but connected in surprising and productive ways through gender and sexual discourses. In bringing the contemporary diaspora in relation to Islamicate pre-modern histories, I see this story as divested from anachronistic Western conceptions of progress and authentic gay identity. In this regard I conceptualize my analysis as re-mediating understandings of temporality (and spatiality), and the trans-temporal queer gaze is in reference to a contemporary diasporic identity formation that is in constant relation to a homo-colonial history.

9 Within my analysis 'identity' is not a stable commodity. Instead I am pushing for a different conception of subjectivity that is not fully anchored in linear/stable/hegemonic 'identity'

speak to archival photography in ways that the archive may not be able to do alone. These colonial legacies are a part of his own identity as a queer Iranian man living in Canada, and speak to deeply entrenched homosocial practices and local traditions rooted in same-sex desire that have not fully been extinguished by colonialism, even within a multi-generational context. I argue that Bagheri depicts everyday forms of Islamicate same-sex desire with contemporary subjects mirroring traditional scenes, which resemble ones in the colonial archive, demonstrating that these are not fully colonized. I contend that his subject position and almost subconscious referencing of the visual tropes and aesthetic details present within the photographic archives show that these pre-modern sexual scripts are still alive and felt within the diaspora. I argue that Bagheri, intentionally or not, does a queer reimagining of the photographic archives, producing drawings that are steeped in photographic history.

This historical record of desire and the aesthetics of intimacy is instrumental in locating contemporary notions of sexual discourse in the Middle East, and their cause-and-effect with those currently living in the diaspora. This relationship, I believe, is demonstrated in the artwork of contemporary artists currently living in the Middle East or its diaspora. This historical purview will provide a necessary methodology for understanding human-rights discourses around sexual tolerance and cultural specificity. Thus, the study of historical visual culture concurrently with contemporary art is a productive method to illustrate the ways the histories of same-sex desire in the Middle East are currently manifested and negotiated by artists, both locally and transnationally. The diaspora's 'queer desires, bodies and subjectivities become dense sites of meaning in the production and reproduction of notions of "culture", "tradition", and communal belonging' (Gopinath 2005:2).

While I later outline the changes to local gender norms imposed by European travellers, it is vital to note how recent some of these took place. For instance, changes to the Arabic language, including different sexual-linguistic codes, happened as late as the 1950s, and have directly affected subsequent generations of people, many of whom are still living the effects of these changes.<sup>10</sup> This act of imperialism was achieved by

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per se. For instance, we can think of 'erotic' as not solely being called into existence through 'identity', but as that which helps constitute various forms of identification and disidentifications in different contexts. In this analysis, identity might be constituted by the ways in which a queer person of colour is perceived by transnational social orders, and also by the ways in which they 'disidentify' with essentialist Eurocentric markers of identity. Subject formation thus falls outside the boundaries of the nation-state and normative citizenship and their identifications.

- 10 The Arabic word for sex, *jins*, appeared sometime in the early twentieth century, and carried with it not only its new meanings of biological sex and national origin, but also its old meanings of type and kind and ethnolinguistic origin, among others. The word in the sense of type and kind has existed in Arabic since time immemorial, and is derived from the Greek *genus*. As late as 1870, its connotation of sex had not yet come into usage. An



removing local understandings of homosocial desire – something that existed as a non-issue, was not seen as an identity and did not need a name or categorization – and replacing them with specific Arabic words created by Europeans that reflected Western sexual practices. This has had implications for the diaspora and subsequent generations in insidious ways, for they were socialized with these new disavowals of un-modern homosociality, and with the demonization of Western homosexuality.<sup>11</sup> They were then left with a homosocial history still steeped within their own cultural traditions, but now with the contradictory disavowal of homosexual subjectivity. In order to challenge the concept of stable or fixed identities, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1993) has argued that cultural hybridity results from various forms of colonization and leads to cultural collisions and interchanges. In the attempt to assert colonial power and to create civilized subjects, ‘the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different – a mutation, a hybrid’ (ibid.:111). This hybrid subject contradicts both the attempt to fix and control indigenous cultures and the illusion of cultural authenticity or purity. The notion of the in-between is relevant, for the diaspora (in this case, also the queer diaspora) is then left with opposing views of Western and non-Western sexual practices, a conflicted historical framing of Arab sexual discourses, all the while being measured by Western narratives of modernity, progress and enlightened (Euro-American) sexual identity.

### Reading loss in an image

Where does eroticism lie within an image, and how do we read the queerness of an image?<sup>12</sup> To work through this question, I turn to visual analysis and examine the artwork of Iranian-Canadian artist Ebrin Bagheri. Born in 1983, Bagheri is an Iranian

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unspecific word for sexuality, *jinsiyyah* – which also means nationality and citizenship – was coined in the 1950s by translators of the works of Freud (see Massad 2002).

- 11 More recently Muta’ al-Safadi, translator of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, has introduced the more specific term, *jinsaniyyah*. Important here is the legacy this linguistic coloniality has on the current Middle Eastern discourse of sexuality. European expressions of sexual deviance were adopted in Arabic in the mid-1950s, to be translated literally as *al-shudhudh al-jinsi*. This coinage is now commonly used in the media and in polite company to refer to the Western concept of homosexuality (see Foucault 1990b, trans. Muta’al-Safadi; abr. in Massad 2002:372).
- 12 Informed by Sharon Holland and her book *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012), my use of the term ‘erotic’ does not anchor itself in the psychoanalytic but rather fluctuates between dictionary definitions of the words ‘desire’ and ‘erotic’. The homoeroticism I study is located between the object relations inherent in ‘desire’ – a wish for something – and the desired subject as object, demonstrating the way in which sexuality is inextricable from the erotic itself. It is also important to think of ‘colonial homoeroticism’ in relation to and distinct from ‘diasporic homoeroticism’, for the power dynamics that govern the sexual body change within the two conceptions of eroticization.



visual artist currently living and working in Toronto, Canada. Working primarily in drawing and painting, he has been exploring issues pertinent to Iranian culture and identity. In particular, Bagheri uses portraiture to explore themes of masculinity and gender. In these, he alludes to historical notions of pre-modern desire and gender norms as alternatives to the current Western models. Greatly invested in Persian literature and poetry, Bagheri's large-scale drawings echo Persian miniature paintings in their details and intricacies. Using these poetic and literary tropes in conjunction with elements of Persian visual culture, his work complicates notions of Persian culture, contemporary Iranian identity, and the conflicting themes of gender and sexuality that might arise at their intersection.

In his artwork *Untitled* (2015) from his 'Eastern Desires' series (2014–17), Bagheri uses delicate drawing techniques coupled with immense detail to depict scenes of Iranian men that fluctuate between being the contemporary, and visual references to Iran prior to the industrial revolution and the modern period. These intimate scenes, at times evocative of *hammam* or bath-house settings, are coupled with visual motifs reminiscent of Qajar dynasty Persian paintings that point to a masculinity of the subject that is unlike those in traditional depictions of Iranian men.<sup>13</sup> Later series of works like 'Someone Who is Like No-One' (2017) use similar historical references and delicate drawing techniques, coupled with jarring visual tropes that look out of place. Such tropes include bloodied hands in *Untitled [I]* (2017) or figures with red noses in *Untitled [II]* (2017) and add a dimension of abnormality to the characters. These tropes can be linked to themes of illness, disease, quarantine and, in the case of the clown-like red nose, even a trickster element, implying that these figures fall outside normative social acceptance. The theme of not belonging is extended in the artist's use of traditional notions of hiding, and various critiques of the binaries between private/public culture and visibility/invisibility. Using these different strategies, Bagheri

13 It is important to question the language used to title the series, and whether or not it is self-Orientalizing. If so, does it speak to Bagheri's distance from his Iranian culture by being in the diaspora, heightening his need for cultural authenticity? I contend that tropes such as foreignness, exoticism and Otherness can be used productively and strategically in order to add critical discourse to sex and gender. The historicity analysed in this article shows Orientalist tropes to be part of a wider system of cultural and visual elements entangled within the web of imperial and colonial contact. Bagheri links and connects visual imagery, histories of sexuality and histories of colonialism, all of which include Orientalism as a primary component within the asymmetries of power. In this way, his work is in some measure also responding to and is critically resonant with Canadian Islamophobia, racism and homo-Orientalism. This response to racism and Orientalism can be seen in the naming of his series with historically Orientalist terms such as 'Eastern Desires', and he critiques the isolation and Othering sometimes felt by the queer Iranian diaspora in his series 'People You May Know'.



Figure 1 (upper left) *Untitled*, from 'Eastern Desires' series, E. Bagheri, 2015. Pencil crayon and ballpoint pen on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2 (upper right) *Untitled [I]*, from 'Someone Who Is Like No-One' series, E. Bagheri, 2016. Pencil crayon and ballpoint pen on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 3 (below central) *Ahmed, Tunisie*. R. Lenhert and E. Landrock, 1904. Coloured gelatin print/glass-plate negative and hand-colored photogravure. Courtesy of the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

unsettles traditional depictions of Iranian men, examining the shifts in gender norms from pre-modern Iran and putting them in dialogue with contemporary identities.

To understand the context in which the photographic archives exist, it is important to further outline the complex relationship between sexuality and colonialism. In doing so, it is productive not to position colonialism as only a minor component within the study of sexuality. Instead, I contend that the history of colonialism is a valuable tool for accessing a history of sexuality. As feminist historian Afsheneh Najmabadi (2005:3) notes, 'in the nineteenth century, homoeroticism and same-sex practices came to mark Iran as backward; heteronormalization of eros and sex became a condition of "achieving modernity," a project that called for heterosocialization of public space and a reconfiguration of family life'. This heteronormalization appears in the overlapping of colonialism, same-sex desire and the way visual culture was used within the imperial civilizing mission of Western Modernity.

Historically, various silencing practices were introduced in the Ottoman Empire by European travellers, and these led to the censorship of homoerotic cultural practices. These culminated in a drastic shift in language, deriving from Victorian sexual discourses being imposed on local conceptions of gender. Historians have documented the travel journals of Europeans who visited regions of the Ottoman Empire, noting their astonishment and disgust with same-sex tradition, and that local men openly 'flaunted' their relations with other men and adolescent boys. It should be noted that these travel journals were translated from their respective Anglo-European languages into Arabic and local languages to be circulated, in order to cause shame and embarrassment, an irreparable act of repression and sexual imperialism (see El-Rouayheb 2005; Ze'evi 2006).

In *The History of Sexuality* (1990:3), Michel Foucault traces the repression of sexuality in the Victorian era of the bourgeoisie, claiming that silence became the rule on the subject of sex. Historian Dror Ze'evi's (2006) study *Producing Desire* deftly maps out the progress of Western sexual discourses in colonizing the local traditions of homosocial desire in the Ottoman Middle East. Scholars need to develop the mechanisms of silence that Foucault wrote about, and linked accordingly to the silencing practices that were introduced by European travellers to publicly shame the homoeroticism of the Ottoman Middle East. Ze'evi contends that there was a great loss at the turn of the century, when local sexual scripts were erased but not replaced with new ones, leaving a silence and void in the discourse of Ottoman sexuality. Such silences are evident in the expurgatory practices in publishing, the censorship of literature and the public shame caused by the European travel journals. As Ze'evi elaborates on modernity's stronghold on local sexual discourses in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire:

Thus began the journey to suppress established sexual discourses, silence them, and replace them with others. None of the discursive scripts... – medicine, law, Sufi

literature, dream interpretation, shadow theatre – were spared. As we have seen, they all either disappeared in the late nineteenth century or were transformed into almost sterile genres in which sex and sexuality are seldom discussed, and even then always obliquely... The sense of embarrassment felt toward the old sexual discourse could not, in and of itself, produce a new one. As familiar sexual scripts collapsed under the onslaught of the travelogue, no new ones came to take their place. The Ottoman and Arab lands experienced unprecedented transformation: sexual discourse moves out of the textual sphere and into the arena of male and female intimate circles, while a curtain of silence descended on the sexual stage.

(2006:165)

We can also read this loss through the photographs of European Orientalists in the Middle East, like the Austro-Hungarian photographer Rudolf Lenhert and his Swiss business partner Ernst Landrock. Lenhert was born in Bohemia in 1876, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and is now part of the Czech Republic. He first travelled to Tunis in 1904, where he met his friend and later business partner Landrock, and the pair established a photographic studio in Tunis, working closely together for more than 20 years. They later established studios in Tunis, Munich, Leipzig and Cairo, and published their photographs under the studio name of 'Lehnert & Landrock'.

In their photograph *Ahmed, Tunisie*, sometimes known as *Boy With Flowers* (1908), a young Tunisian boy, seemingly an adolescent, stands in front of the camera. His pose is a frontal portrait framing his shoulders, making the face and gaze of the boy the focus of the picture. This boy stares at the viewer without any facial hair, adorned with several flowers on the side of his face, and dark luscious hair peaks through the loosely wound turban covering his head. While not immediately clear, this photograph pictures the very loss outlined by Ze'evi, both in the subject of the young boy, and in the elements excluded from the scene, like facial hair. Many authors have remarked on the significance of facial hair and age in homoerotic literature and cultural traditions (e.g. Babayan and Najmabadi 2008; Boone 2014; El-Rouayheb 2005; Najmabadi 2005b; Wright and Rowson 1997). Najmabadi points out that 'the growth of a full-grown beard marked adult manhood, [and] the adolescent male's transition from an object of desire to a desiring subject' (2005:15). Facial hair was so important to the aesthetics of beauty that an adult man who shaved his beard in Persia was thought to be declaring his desire to be desired by other men.<sup>14</sup> In the photograph taken by Lenhert and Landrock (1932), the subject is lacking most visible

14 Socially, male desire was acceptable before this point, and decrees against shaving one's beard showed the cultural fear that young men may want to remain an object of desire rather than over time (and age) becoming the desiring man. The same disapproval was true if an older man was no longer beardless, but they remained interested in other older men (see Najmabadi 2005:16, 23).

facial hair. Therefore, the viewer is meant to assume that this boy does not yet have a beard and is still not marked by adult manhood. This implies that the young Algerian boy photographed by Lenhert and Landrock seems to be an object of desire par excellence, yet the standards of beauty that govern this boy being a desiring subject change rapidly over the course of the century, as facial hair became a visible cultural difference between Europeans and local populations. To further investigate this loss, we must look outside the frame of the photograph in order to better engage with the content of the photograph itself.

To elucidate the colonial ramifications of a photograph such as Lenhert and Landrock's, or the changing discourses of gender that are recorded, circulated and therefore influenced by the medium of photography, I suggest we compare this photograph to a contemporary drawing by Bagheri. One might immediately recognize the Islamicate attributes to the figure, but not necessarily the homosociality behind the drawing. In conducting a deep reading of the symbolic and stylistic elements, it becomes clear that this drawing speaks to the photography of Lenhert and Landrock in surprising yet harmonious ways. Bagheri's drawing *Untitled [II]* (2015, Figure 1) from his series *Eastern Desires* bears many resemblances to the aforementioned photograph, mirroring the focus of a young adolescent boy and the composition of the frontal portrait, with the soft drawing techniques echoing the fogginess of the photograph itself. In this drawing, a young boy of no more than twenty years of age stares longingly at the viewer. His head covered in a turban that is slightly askew in order for the viewer to see his long luscious locks of hair falling to the side of his head. His long eyelashes, steady gaze and wisps of faint facial hair accentuate his soft features. The figure is clothed in a tunic embellished with red cherries, mirroring the cherries adorning one of his earlobes like an earring. In similarity with the young Algerian boy in the European photograph, the youthful boy in Bagheri's drawing does not have a full beard and instead has a *khatt*, the mere hint of a moustache, which marks the moment before the full growth of facial hair took place (Najmabadi 2005:15). This is the time an adolescent is considered most beautiful, but that hint of a moustache also heralded the beginning of the end of his status as object of desire for adult men, and his own movement into adult manhood. Here, Bagheri captures the moment when this boy is still an *amrad*, a young adolescent male who was – according to the beauty standards of the pre-modern Persian culture – an object of utmost desire.

The cherries juxtapose the conceived masculinity of the boy with their fragility and softness. Their repetition all over his tunic might speak to a delicateness and softness in order to image an alternative masculinity, but his earring references another homosocial instance in Islamicate historiography. Both the flowers ornamented at the side of the Algerian boys' head in Lenhert and Landrock's photograph (1932) and Bagheri's subject's adornment with a rich red cherry earring evoke the history of the dancing boys, or *köçek*, in the Ottoman Empire. While Ze'evi analyses these dancing



boys for their gender-bending sexual fluidity, historian Joseph Boone outlines that the dancing boys were an established norm throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and performed in cafes, at court, in wedding processions and even religious festivals. These dancing boys were adorned with jewellery and were elaborately dressed, and numerous Orientalist photographs document the European fascination with them (Behdad and Gartlan 2013; Boone 2014:106).

French photographers Délié and Béchard were ardent Orientalists producing photographs of the Middle East and the local population. Working in Egypt, French photographer Henri Béchard operated a studio in Cairo in the Ezbekiah Garden district, where he sold photographs of the region to tourists, as well as ethnographic photographs and Egyptian costume studies.<sup>15</sup> French photographer Émile Bechard (assumed to be related to Henri) is best known for having presented a set of photographs he took in Egypt at the Universal Exhibition of 1878 in Paris, which earned him a gold medal. Émile Bechard formed a studio with Hippolyte Délié in Cairo during the 1870s with the moniker 'Délié et Bechard'.<sup>16</sup> The partnership was dissolved sometime after 1872, but both continued to work in Egypt as commercial photographers.<sup>17</sup>

The photograph *Au Jardin De l'Esbekieh (Cairo)* (Figure 4) by Délié and Béchard (c.1870) is no exception to the homocolonial fetishism of local aesthetics of beauty, and illustrates a young boy dancing within the photograph. Elaborately adorned with body jewellery and long dangling earrings to accompany his long flowing gown, the boy holds cymbals in each hand. The provenance of the photograph signals that the image was captured in Cairo, so this likely Egyptian boy shows us what the *köçek* looked like before they disappeared from public discourse. As historian Joseph Boone (2014:104) outlines, instead of recognizing an androgynous ideal of beauty in the Middle East, European travellers tended to see what seemed like an unsettling class of effeminate traits combined with a dress that was neither male nor female. In fact, the nineteenth-century British Orientalist William Ouseley, who served as Persian ambassador, described the *köçek* as 'wearing the complete dress of a woman, and imitating, with the most disgusting effeminacy, the looks and attitudes of the dancing girl' (1823:405). The subsequent banning of the *köçek* from public performances in the mid-nineteenth-century indicates the degree to which Middle Eastern people were seeing their heritage negatively reflected back to them in Western writings, and they began to modify those cultural traditions that seemed to stand in the way

15 In 1888 Henri Delé published a set of photogravures, *L'Égypte et la Nubie*.

16 They had the photographic concession at the Cairo antiquities museum and produced the photobook: *Album du Musée Boulaq: Photographie par Délié et Béchard, avec texte explicatif par Auguste Marriette Bey* (1872).

17 The timing of their partnership is unclear, but it is certain that both worked separately at various times. This is known because cartes-de-visite and cabinet cards exist with both single logos for each photographer as well as with a joint logo (see Hannavy 2008).



Figure 4 *Au Jardin De l'Esbekieh (Cairo), H. Délié and E. Béchard, 1870s. Cartes-de-visite photograph. Courtesy of the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.*

of achieving Western modernity (Boone 2014:106). Homosexually suspect activities, as determined by Europeans, then became cultural aspects that were seen as part of a regressive past. Thus, was a homoerotic and homosocial tradition extinguished.

The subject in Bagheri's drawing marks a moment prior to the banning of the *köçek*, prior to European travellers shaming the unabashed homoerotic culture of coffee houses and public baths, which were too lurid for their tastes, and before language was created to deride long-standing local traditions that were deemed backwards and un-modern. While the subject in Bagheri's drawing (2015) lacks the jewellery of the young Egyptian boy of Délié and Béchard's photograph (c.1870), the cherry earrings reference this loss, a ghostly reminder of the *köçek* that exist only within historical artefacts such as Délié and Béchard's photograph, and which are now removed from public consciousness.

When relating Rudolf Lehnert's hand painted photograph, *Jeunes Arabes, Tunis* (1910) to the men in Bagheri's *Untitled [II]* (2015) drawing, it becomes clear that





Figure 5 *Jeunes Arabes, Tunis, R. Lehnert, c.1910. Colourized postcard. Courtesy of Dr. Joseph Allen Boone. Private Collection.*

kinship affiliation and embodiment become reimagined as Bagheri remembers and reinvents historical ways of being. This method allows for these archives to speak to one another in ways that uncover the histories of colonialism and imperial power that lead to their making. Unlike the young boys in Lehnert's photograph (1910), Bagheri's young men are more dominant and assertive in their pose. Taking up most of the picture frame in their composition, they lack the passivity and docility of many Orientalist photographs, creating a different power dynamic between the subject and viewer. If we follow the approach of feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975), it is in their traditional exhibitionist role that eroticized boys are simultaneously looked at and displayed by European travellers and photographers. Like women within the history of Western art, their appearance is coded for strong visual and erotic impact within Orientalist photography, so that they can signify a desire 'to-be-looked-at-ness'. This analysis has used contemporary art in order to trace gender fluidity and the changing scripts governing same-sex desire across much of North Africa. It is essential to assess the movement of colonial powers and the changing beauty standards in Persia, and the results of altered gender roles in the Ottoman Empire. Following Gayatri Gopinath's (2013:272) use of the term 'queer regions', this research displaces area studies with queer theory, and applies a historical exploration of the archive in order to better understand the current moment.

### Visualizing erasure

In examining Lenhert and Landrock's photograph *Ahmed, Tunisie*, and sometimes known as *Boy With Flowers* (1908), in relationship to Bagheri's oeuvre, there is a parallel aesthetics of beauty regarding dancing boys and the handsome beardless youths that were hired at coffee houses to serve patrons all across the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>18</sup> As historian Khaled El-Rouayheb notes, the famous Damascene poet Ahmad al-'Inayati was said to have the habit of going every morning to the coffee houses 'with running water and handsome cup-bearer... and drink numerous cups of coffee' (2005:43).

The archives I analyse in relation to Ebrin Bagheri's artwork are not only queer, they are also colonial and homo-colonial archives of imperial encounter. Bagheri reimagines not just photographic subject matter, but through the process of drawing uses his own hand to remove the colonial language imbued within the photographic development of the medium, and within these archives. In doing so, he reimagines and reinvents the original archival sources, and I argue he locates his own Iranian-ness within the once Orientalized homoerotic photographs of young boys taken by European travellers. He does so by inserting his own local understandings of Iranian traditions, which transcend geographic borders and share similar sexual discourses with the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. Bagheri globalizes a regionally colonial history of desire and representation by using the language of the photographic archives in his contemporary drawing, thus blurring the lines between the photographic medium and drawing. Bagheri's drawings are reminiscent of the pre-modern sexual script of the beardless *amarad*, the playfulness of the beautiful *köçek* (dancing boys) and serving boys working coffee houses and bath houses. By expanding local tradition to encompass much of the Ottoman Empire, Bagheri's drawing cites a specific moment in multiple geographic spheres, creating a network of inter-connection between locales. These aesthetic and homosocial traditions are not necessarily solely Iranian, and speak widely to the conventions of beauty and sexual fluidity that were present all across North Africa, the Middle East, and the entire Ottoman Empire.

The complication of temporal boundaries is important, as it is a valuable method for coping with the gaps within colonial archives. Archival records serve as primary documents within art history, but what happens when records from this period do not exist, due to colonial encounters and imperialism? Often, the archives and objects remaining in the Global South, are those that were left behind, deemed unworthy of looting by colonial powers, this creating major gaps within archival records and surviving artifacts. What this analysis illustrates is that these gaps can also be of a

18 The Rudolf Lehnert photograph, *Jeune Kayble en Algerie* (1932), can be found on the cover of Joseph Boone's book, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (2014). See Figure 6, Lehnert and Landrock's photograph, *Young Boy with Headscarf* (1910) for another example of this representational pattern.



*Figure 6 Young Boy with Headscarf, R. Lenhert and E. Landrock, 1910. Gelatin print. Courtesy of the Ken and Jenny Jacobson Orientalist Photography Collection, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.*

different kind, and seen within European representations of local populations. Due to the active erasure of local sexual scripts and same-sex desire that were imposed by European travellers, even the records that do remain will forever be clouded by an immense loss and absence. Imperial encounters and colonialism in and of themselves have created this gap and changed the way local populations conceive of same-sex desire, including the ways in which it is pictured and visualized. It is because of this gap that I turn to contemporary artists who are reimagining these colonial archives, even at a subconscious or instinctive level, to create a counter-archive where homoerotic desire hasn't been silenced or removed. This is a liberating complication of linear time, and provides an empowered and anti-colonial reading of history that

accounts for the current moment and the diasporas experiencing these histories. In order for dynamics of power to always be at the fore of queer theoretical analysis, it is important to question how these sexual logics connect historic colonialism with the contemporary diaspora.

### **Conclusion: drawing as photography**

What does it mean to locate photography within a drawing? To answer this question, I turn to contemporary drawing. Photograph has helped create an imaginary of the Middle East that is then reified in culture, and therefore shapes the way we see. While it is an unconventional pairing for analysis, my contention is that to better illustrate the colonial ramifications of photography in the Middle East outside of the picture plane itself, it is important to look at how the Islamicate diaspora has used the language, tropes, composition and stylistic elements that are particular to photography, and examine how they have developed this visuality into a decolonized representation of same-sex desire in other media.

In comparing the striking similarities in subject matter, composition and monochromatic palette between Bagheri's drawings and the photographs, it becomes clear that the photographic nature of these images is inescapable. The language developed and cemented by photography to depict, sexualize, eroticize and, in the case of these colonial archives, Orientalize, is deeply embedded within the drawings of Ebrin Bagheri. It becomes unproductive to separate the photography from the drawing, and the drawings themselves not only reference a history of photography in the Middle East, they also explore the language and tropes of local photography through a less mechanical medium. Elsewhere, I have explored contemporary Arab artists and their use of hand-painted photography to add subjectivity, inserting their voices to better articulate their identities in a way that added a personal element of touch and manipulation to a photograph (see Gayed 2014, 2016). Here, we see something different: rather than further manipulate the photographs which hold the colonial knowledge of representation, the medium of photography itself is explored, and the drawing becomes inextricably tied to the photography in which it references. The eroticized boys are pictured within the photograph; while, importantly, the reading of loss, of both coloniality and local eroticization, is located outside its frame. It is for this reason that the turning to drawing as a way of better understanding the colonial impacts of these photographs becomes less a controversial decision, and more a necessary step in the analysis of visual culture that helps better understand colonial photography in the Middle East, and the role it played in the changing sexual politics that ensued from the nineteenth century and continue to develop today.

Bagheri's youthful subject presents a moment of uncolonized sexual scripts that reflect Islamicate notions of beauty and desire, left to be interpreted and read in modern society with the language of modernized sexual scripts, and under the purview of contemporary art. This interesting flux and flow of historicized sexual



bodies and the contemporary artist brings pre-modern sexual discourses out of the archives, and into the lived reality of queer diasporic subjects today. The shadow of homosociality and the erasure of alternative sexual codes and same-sex desire is seen in the longing gaze of Bagheri's youth, in that fleeting moment between being an object of desire and becoming an object of abjection. This work raises compelling questions about the im/possibilities of diasporic self-representation in relation to colonial frames and conventions of representation. This analysis questions the ways in which we can see ourselves outside the visibilization-regimes of the colonizing eye.

This article illustrates that pre-modern Islamicate sexual scripts are not fully colonized and live on in multigenerational subjects of the diaspora. I have outlined the process of colonization and the immense struggle Islamicate sexual discourses faced in the age of modernization. The study of visual culture (both archival and the contemporary art of living artists) shows how hangovers from these sexual scripts are still alive and deeply entrenched within diaspora consciousness. The double bind that the queer diasporic subject often faces can be linked to these tensions, and the study of visual art and culture can illustrate the specific ways these sexual scripts are manifested and negotiated by non-Western subjects in the West.

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