

# 14

## QUEERING DIASPORA THROUGH VISUAL ART

### Contesting the double binds of homonationalism

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The art of the queer diaspora offers a rich vantage point from which the relationships of colonial trauma and displacement can be read. Furthermore, they complicate notions of homeland by exposing and alluding to the experiences of living with and through a transnational sexual identity. The cultural production of the queer diaspora and diasporic sexuality can help complicate and disturb the meta-narrative that characterises Middle Eastern cultures as sexually oppressive and intolerant, on the one hand, and Western cultures as sexually liberated and accepting, on the other. I explore these themes through the lens of visual art, and in particular through the works of three diasporic artists: Jamil Hellu, Laurence Rasti and Nilbar Güreş. Through his art, Hellu, a Syrian American visual artist, explores non-Western ways of being queer that are informed by diaspora consciousness. Laurence Rasti is an Iranian-Swiss visual artist who photographs queer Iranian refugees in Turkey, while Nilbar Güreş, a diasporic Turkish visual artist living and working in Vienna, sheds light on the immense violence and trauma that queer and trans subjects face both in the Middle East and the diaspora.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Queering diaspora**

Queer diasporic art often cites the links between and critique of the colonial past and the present, creating powerful points of relationality between visual culture and diasporic consciousness. 'Diaspora consciousness' has been understood as a strong and enduring group consciousness of the homeland, in which feelings of solidarity are more or less shared by the members of a diasporic collectivity in a host country or new setting (Cohen, 1997). Here I argue that beyond this definition, which seems well suited to capture some of the more historically prevalent experiences of diaspora, there are nuances and permutations in the present that might also constitute diaspora consciousness. One such site of diaspora consciousness is the art of queer diasporic Middle Eastern subject, where colonial histories, trauma and loss are

embedded within expressions of everyday queer diasporic experiences. There are productive links between diasporic consciousness, on the one hand, and identity, on the other. Paul Gilroy (1999, p. 318) argues that 'identity provides a way of understanding the interplay between our subjective experience of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity is formed'. However, as Gilroy cautions, identity is not simply that which is shared, rather 'it is always particular, as much about difference as about shared belonging' (ibid.). For James Clifford (1999, pp. 256–257):

diaspora consciousness is [thus] constituted both negatively and positively. It is constituted negatively by experiences of discrimination and exclusion ... [it] is produced positively through identification with world-historical cultural/political forces, such as 'Africa' or 'China.' The process may not be as much about being African or Chinese, as about being American or British, or wherever one has settled, differently.

In a similar vein, I argue that an interplay of sameness and difference underpins the queer Arab diaspora's search for belonging. Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, same-sex desires have been marked by derision in the modern Middle East, eventually leading to the open hostility towards queer identity we find today. Homophobia in the Middle East has often been explained as a legacy of colonialism and symptomatic of postcolonial nation-building projects. The resultant assumption of Middle Eastern homophobia can be felt in diasporic settings like North America and Europe, where there is a heightened sense of difference between 'us' and 'them', that is, the assimilationist process that marks 'good' immigrants from bad. Sherene Razack (2008, p. 117) describes a common trope in Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrant experiences which she explains as 'the story of the unassimilable, fatally pre-modern Muslim community encountering an advanced [Western] civilization'. Within this logic, the gay or queer Muslim and/or Middle Eastern subject must be unproblematically 'homonormative' in the West and live in awe of the liberal values that grant them the 'right' to be gay. This orientalisng trope enforces a strict binary between same-sex desire and being Muslim, a dichotomy felt both in the Middle East and the diaspora.

Nadine Naber interrogates the dichotomies that ensnare Arab communities as they clamour for a sense of safety and belonging in the United States. Naber (2012, p. 234) argues that 'conventional nationalisms rely on a patrilinear heteronormative reproductive logic that maintains community boundaries through the ideal of heterosexual marriage and reproduction'. In their edited collection, Rebab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber (2011, p. xxii) argue that when articulating Arabness in the United States, the diaspora has been shaped by an assemblage of different visions of how Arabs survive in North America. They stress that

historical and contextual factors related to the imperialist relationship between the United States and the Arab world have produced distinct forms of racism against and criminalization of individuals and communities perceived to be Arab or Muslim, especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001.

This means that the racism and cultural differences Arab families often experience in the West can lead to an intensification of nationalism and a reification of some sort of authentic cultural heritage. For diasporic subjects, this means that difference and dichotomies are heightened, and notions of what it means to be Arab in North America are radically different from being

Arab in the Middle East. Importantly, Naber argues that for the Middle Eastern diaspora in the United States, gender and sexuality are among the most powerful symbols consolidating an imagined difference between Arabs and Americans. This has, more often than not, cast out queer Arabs and Middle Easterners from what it means to be an integrated part of the diaspora. As Naber (2012, p. 4) reflects: 'I learned that many of the Arabs I knew in the [San Francisco] Bay Area had more socially conservative understandings of Arab concepts of religion, family, gender, and sexuality than their counterparts in Jordan.'

Naber's signalling of a contradictory flow between the diaspora and the imagined homeland can also be found in Ramy Aly's work on Arabs in London, where the tropes of cultural authenticity can often involve modes of auto or self-orientalism in visual depictions of Arabness.<sup>2</sup> In considering some of the ways that young British-born or raised Arabs represent themselves, Aly notes that:

fashions and aesthetic orientation in the Arab world and the Arab diaspora seem to flow in opposite directions. While middle-class Arab lifestyle magazines in the Middle East abound with images of Arabs in the latest Western fashions and interiors as testament to their inclusion in (a European) modernity, Arabs in London draw on folkloric Arab past to make the same kind of self-validating visual statements about themselves within the context of multicultural London.

(2015, p. 181)

It is through the analysis of visual culture that these complex and often contradictory expressions of Arabness can be seen and read in an alternate visual language. Thus, the visual in the context of diaspora offers an opportunity to add layers to what it means to visualise belonging.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamicate queer subject becomes disruptive not only to ideas of authenticating diasporic cultural projects of survival but equally to a larger set of imperialist dynamics whereby Islamicate queer subjects in the diaspora are used as part of a Western homocolonial project. Following Marshall Hodgson's (1974 pp. 57–59) definition of the Islamicate rather than the less precise terms *Arab*, *Middle Eastern* or *Islamic*, I use the notion of Islamicate sexualities referring not directly to the religion of Islam itself, but to the social and cultural complexities historically associated with Islam, Muslims, and inclusive of non-Muslims living within the same region and other regions of the world that share colonial histories.<sup>4</sup> Momin Rahman (2014) argues against the erroneously assumed mutual exclusivity between queer and Middle Eastern and/or Asian cultures and aims to illuminate the intersections and complexities of current binaries between and within Muslim communities and families, gay communities and culture, and wider Western political culture and discourses. Most importantly, Rahman argues that we must accept that the Muslim experience of sexual diversity politics is significantly different from the Western experience and that this reality undermines any assumption that the processes of 'Muslim modernisation' will inevitably lead to the same outcomes around sexuality as those experienced in the West. Thus, Middle Eastern homosexuality, including in the diaspora, will never look the same as Western homosexuality. Rahman goes on to define homocolonialism as 'the deployment of LGBTIQ rights and visibility to stigmatise non-Western cultures and conversely reassert the supremacy of the Western nations and civilization' (ibid., p. 7). Specifically, Rahman characterises 'Western exceptionalism as the primary political idea that is triangulated through the process of homocolonialism' (ibid., p. 118). Rahman posits that the queer Muslim subject is intersectional in the spaces they take up in society, and they naturally challenge the monolithic, monocultural versions of queer Western identity politics and the positioning of queer politics both in the Middle East and the diaspora. Here, the sheer existence of queer

diasporic Muslims destabilises Western queer discourse and the ways in which queer subjectivity is 'knowable'.

Articulations of Arabness are then grounded in Arab traditions and sensibilities about family, selfhood and ways of being in the world, but they are also hybrid and historically contingent. Benedict Anderson (2006) has argued that nation, nationality and nationalism have all proven notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyse. He argues that 'nationality', 'nation-ness' and 'nationalism' are cultural artefacts that require interrogation, especially their coming into being and the ways their meanings have changed over time. Therefore, I propose to study the art of diasporic queer Middle Eastern subjects as artefacts of postcolonial nation-ness. This is all the more necessary, given that a queer Middle Eastern diaspora has traditionally been excluded or written out of what it means to be Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim. Thus, in turning to them, new ways of imagining and reading postcolonial subjectivity in the diaspora can be afforded. Visual culture often provides another language to better articulate these complex identities and subjectivities. I, therefore, explore the potential that visual art of the queer diaspora has to disrupt authentic notions of Arabness and to expose a Western, neo-imperial, homogeneous gay identity that remains a site of violence for the queer diaspora.

### Visualising homocolonialism in the art of Jamil Hellu

While the interplays of race and sexual desire are not new, looking at these sites within the context of queer diasporic art is noteworthy. Jamil Hellu is a San Francisco-based visual artist whose work revolves around representations of identity and transnational interpretations of queer sexuality. Born and raised in Brazil with a Syrian father and a Paraguayan mother, Hellu uses photography, video, performance and mixed-media art installations to create contrasting metaphors about the politics of cultural identities and the fluidity of sexuality. His art is about reclaiming and redefining what it means to be Middle Eastern and/or queer. Hellu explains:

My father's family is from Syria, originally from a town called *Mashta al-Helu*, from which I bear my last name. Looking for ways to voice my despair over homophobia and violence in the Middle East, I started to produce works claiming my own Arab roots. My latest projects explore my identity as a gay man in relation to my Syrian heritage and Arab ethnicity.

(Soldi and Hellu, 2016)

In his 2016 installation, *Be My Guest* (Figures 14.1–14.4), Hellu presents two refurbished antique chairs with a footrest positioned between them, creating an intimate seating area. The two chairs face each other at an angle and are flanked by white curtains matching the same pattern on the furniture. The white fabric used in the furniture and curtains is adorned with figurative representations of Middle Eastern men engaging in various scenes of intimacy and undress. Sometimes kissing, hugging, wrestling and dancing, these representations of men are stamped repeatedly in black ink onto the white textile to create a repetitive design. In *Be My Guest*, Hellu cites the taboo of male homosexuality in both the Victorian-era empire and the Arab context that it colonised by using Victorian furniture as a metaphor for the cultural history of sexual repression in the Middle East.<sup>5</sup>

To be identified as Middle Eastern, the men are visibly hairy, play instruments that are popular in the Middle East and wear clothing and headdress that are identifiably Middle Eastern. The tension here between East and West, modern and Victorian, Orientalism and Occidentalism, all work in complex ways with one another (see Manalansan, 2003). These



Figure 14.1 *Be My Guest*. Installation: mirror, ottoman, 2 chairs, 2 pillows. Upholstered life-size furniture with textile pattern digitally printed on fabric.

Source: J. Hellu (2016).



Figure 14.2 *Be My Guest*. Detail of chair. Installation: mirror, ottoman, 2 chairs, 2 pillows. Upholstered life-size furniture with textile pattern digitally printed on fabric.

Source: J. Hellu (2016).

scenes of homosexual intimacy and leisure were rendered invisible in the Middle East during the Victorian era (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Najmabadi, 2005; Ze'evi, 2006; Boone, 2014). By upholstering these tender and intimate depictions of Arab men onto the Victorian furniture, they now define the very surface that they cover. In this defiant act of colonising the pristine





Figure 14.3 *Be My Guest*. Detail of pattern. Installation: mirror, ottoman, 2 chairs, 2 pillows. Upholstered life-size furniture with textile pattern digitally printed on fabric.

Source: J. Hellu (2016).

white surface of the furniture with depictions of racialised same-sex intimacy, this installation ensures that these depictions are encrypted with the very Victorian discourses of sexual repression and knowledge production that sought to erase them.

After nations in the Global North started decriminalising homosexuality, the goalposts of modernity moved and homosexual liberation became inextricably tied to being a modern



Figure 14.4 *Be My Guest*. Detail of Oud Player. Installation: mirror, ottoman, 2 chairs, 2 pillows. Upholstered life-size furniture with textile pattern digitally printed on fabric.

Source: J. Hellu (2016).

nation.<sup>6</sup> Homosexuality and gay liberation are thus insidiously used as a newly changed endpoint of Western modernity, excluding the Middle East from ever reaching progress as defined by the Global North. As Hiram Pérez (2015, p. 3) argues, 'Neither gay liberation politics nor queer activism has ever fully reckoned with the tacit, if complex, participation of gay modernity in U.S. [and Euro-American] imperialist expansion.' The hostility that queer people feel in the Middle East today is in part tied to this colonial history. Thus, Hellu symbolically and visually traces the violence inflicted upon homosexuals in the Middle East to the Victorian period while simultaneously linking this homocolonialism to the violence experienced by contemporary queer subjects today. This uncomfortable reminder seeks to critique and problematise the often heteronormative agendas of the West as the saviour and defender of queer subjects in the Middle East.

*Be My Guest* fuses the aesthetics of Islamicate same-sex desire, such as facial hair and the conventions of homosociality, alongside markers of gay sex synonymous with the Global North, like BDSM harnesses, jockstraps, and sexual scenes that allude to cruising categories of gay male identification in the West, like being a bear, otter or cub.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the male figures in this artwork display the variety of styles and ways in which Middle Eastern headdresses are worn, using multiplicity and repetition as a visual strategy. Illustrating cultural variation in this way means that figures wearing their Palestinian *keffiyeh* over their heads are seen alongside the traditions in other locales, like figures wearing the *ghutra* and *agal*, which are more commonly associated with the Arabian Gulf. Bringing these representations together cites the tensions their specific histories of gender, sexuality and nationalism represent while simultaneously grafting the macro-aggressions and frictions associated with being Arab and being gay.

In creating a link between diaspora consciousness and sexual imperialism in the Middle East, artists like Hellu offer a 'long overdue look at the way concepts of community and belonging

are made across the diaspora, and produce insight into the possibilities for decolonising Arabness or rearticulating Arabness beyond Orientalism or reverse Orientalism' (Naber, 2012, p. 9). The double bind of the queer Middle Eastern diaspora brings with it the racialisation of their sexuality in the Global North, creating frictions with an imagined hegemonic gay community. Racial stigmatisation of queerness in the Global North is echoed by Rahman's (2014) assertion of the ostensibly Muslim queer subject lying outside of normative Western queer politics, pointing to issues of genuine difference and incompatibility. Linking racial difference and the queer diaspora in the Americas to Western imperialism and colonialism, Hellu's artwork uses a complex homocolonial history to outline a coloniality that continues to inflict violence, isolation and trauma to this day.

### Queer migration in the art of Laurence Rasti

To illustrate the complexities of becoming a queer subject for the diasporic individual and how these experiences intersect with queer discourses in the Middle East, I turn to Laurence Rasti's photographic series, *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran* (2017). Rasti was born to Iranian parents in Geneva, Switzerland. Using both Swiss and Iranian cultural codes, Rasti's photographs explore gender, identity and migration. In *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran*, Rasti focuses on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2007 speech at Columbia University where he proclaimed: 'In Iran, we do not have homosexuals like in your country' (ibid., Preface). Coupled with interviews that voice the personal experiences of anonymous migrants, Rasti photographs asylum-seekers in Denizli, Turkey, where hundreds of gay Iranian refugees are stuck in a transit zone. 'Set in this state of limbo, where anonymity is the best protection' (ibid.), Rasti's photographs juxtapose and reimagine the facelessness these migrants experience in the transit zone with Ahmadinejad's attempts to erase their sexual identity from Iranian public consciousness. In one image in the series (Figure 14.5), two women obscure each other by gently cupping their hands to each other's faces. This interplay of visibility and self-preservation is important within refugee and migrant experiences but also to queer experiences both in the Middle East and the diaspora. It is important to dispel the myth of a utopian gay liberation for the queer Middle Eastern diaspora in the Global North, for racial and community violence can be the source of physical and emotional pain as homophobic logics become entwined with articulating Arabness outside of the Middle East. As the historical-colonial heterosexualisation of the Middle East inevitably led to criminalising same-sex desires, so too does a heterosexualisation take place in the diaspora as Middle Eastern cultures are forced into strongly held binaries based on anti-Muslim and anti-brown racism in the Global North. The queer diaspora is, unfortunately, one of the casualties of the racist and homophobic forces that come from both host and home cultures.

For the two women in Figure 14.5, their Iranian identity is in direct (and manufactured) conflict with their Iranian-ness and their queerness. The ways in which their Iranian nationality should somehow make them immune to feeling same-sex desire, and the attitude that gay love can only exist in the West, are both signs of sexual exceptionalism. Sexual exceptionalism occurs through stagings of a US nationalism, for instance, that works in tandem with sexual othering, one that exceptionalises the identities of US citizens often in contrast to Orientalist constructions of perverse 'Muslim sexuality' (Puar, 2007, p. 4). Sexual exceptionalism is understood here as the possession of a feature, like the West's ostensible championing gay rights or Iran condemning homosexuality, that gives a unique mission to a state or a polity and is seen as an anchor to its national identity. This means that sexual exceptionalism, an example of which can be seen in Ahmadinejad's assertion in 2007 that 'In Iran, we do not have homosexuals like





Figure 14.5 *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran*. Inkjet print.

Source: L. Rasti (2014).

in your country', puts Iranian racial identities in direct opposition to a singular, and reductive, queer identity that corresponds to and comes out of the exceptionalism of the American empire's sexual freedoms. This dualism and 'national homosexuality' is part of what Puar (2007, p. 2) terms 'homonationalism', and is a significant part of queer diasporic migrant experiences.

The antagonistic dualism created when one's sexual identity seemingly contradicts one's cultural identity is a tension that aims to define a normative script for both homosexuality and nationalism, placing aspects of racialised queer subjectivity in assumed conflict with one another. Not all subjects in Rasti's photographs are anonymous, some reveal their faces in these scenes of intimacy. Figure 14.6 shows two men standing outside, one embracing the other with his face nuzzled behind his companion's neck. The man being hugged, however, is fully visible to the viewer, closing his eyes in a peaceful embrace. Figure 14.7 similarly portrays two individuals embracing one another, this time with a man holding his partner's hips from behind as he shields his face. His partner, however, adorns bold make-up, painted nails and long curly hair in a purple silk dress. The gender-fluid figure in the forefront makes eye contact with the viewer, ensuring that the heavy eyeliner, pink lips and unshaven beard do not go unnoticed. In this scene both gender conventions and norms of beauty are questioned, revealing the very dualism that at once makes homosexuality punishable by death in Iran and racially stigmatised outside of the Middle East. This brand of homosexuality that the Middle East deems too American and America deems exceptional, as Puar argues, 'operates as a regulatory script not only for normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects' (ibid., p. 2). What does this tell us about the sociological and political landscape of the queer diaspora? As Gayatri Gopinath (2005, p. 11) suggests, to understand queerness as diasporic and diaspora as queer is to recuperate 'desires, practices, and



Figure 14.6 *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran*. Inkjet print.  
Source: L. Rasti (2014).

subjectivities that are rendered impossible or unimaginable within conventional diasporic or nationalist imaginaries'. Such a critical framework of a 'specifically queer diaspora ... may begin to unsettle the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalisation on the other' (ibid., p. 10).

### **Homocolonialism, homonationalism and human rights**

It is important to contextualise decolonisation as it pertains to homosexual tolerance and liberation in the Middle East. The arguments thus far presented take issue with the historical upset of Middle Eastern sexualities by an intolerant Western colonialism, and more recently what Joseph Massad (2008) terms 'The Gay International'. These imperialist projects have in turn shaped local sexual discourses in the Middle East, which were more fluid and community-oriented and not identity-based, forcing a Western binary gender identity model of heteronormativity onto the so-called Other in the Middle East. At the height of these colonial projects from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, homosexuality was also illegal in the legal systems of the colonisers and, consequently, the prohibition of homosexuality in the Middle East was a measure taken as part of a broader formula of mimicking Western modernity.<sup>8</sup> The legacies of Western imperialism on local sexual discourses were a catalyst for homophobic attitudes that more recently have sought to identify 'primitive' sexual discourses in the Middle East and contrast these to the liberal sexual exceptionalism of the United States.

This dilemma is precisely where homocolonialism and homonationalism intersect. As a critique of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses, homonationalism attends to how such



Figure 14.7 *There Are No Homosexuals in Iran*. Inkjet print.  
Source: L. Rasti (2014).

discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to advance civilisational discourses in some contexts and limit the progression of the 'backwards' Other (see Dryden and Lenon, 2016). As Euro-American homocolonialism sought an erasure of same-sex desires in the Middle East, Euro-American homonationalism now champions the same-sex desires they once crushed in an effort to align gay liberation with modernity. Jasbir Puar argues that, for the queer subject, national recognition and inclusion are 'contingent upon the segregation and disqualifications of racial and sexual others from the national imaginary' (2007, p. 2). While homosexuality is currently restricted and criminalised in Middle Eastern societies but is relatively protected in certain Western cultures, contemporary discourses of sexual liberation need to be attentive to these histories of imperial violence at the risk of replicating the same coloniality that led to gay criminalisation in the first place.<sup>9</sup> The only way to correct these historical-colonial dynamics that caused irreparable damage<sup>10</sup> for sexual discourses in the Middle East is a human rights advocacy that does not centre protecting people's sexuality today in a monolithic version of queerness that is manufactured in and exported from the Global North.<sup>11</sup> Echoing Massad's (2008) claims, this suggests that human rights discourses that seek to replicate Western queer models of identity will only reproduce imperial control over sexual discourses in the Middle East.

### **Dangers of heterosexualisation in the art of Nilbar Güreş**

These sexual codes of conduct have lasting effects on the Middle Eastern diaspora, both in the queerness of diasporic subjects, illustrated through Hellu's artwork, and on an exilic



Figure 14.8 Still image from video *Törn*. HD video, colour, sound, 6:00 min.  
Source: N. Güreş (2018).

formation of people who flee the region to escape persecution, as seen in the subjects of Rasti's photographic series. The heterosexualisation of a Middle Eastern culture that actively denies the existence of same-sex desires has very real consequences. The violence inflicted upon queer bodies can be seen in the photo-video installation *Törn* (2018) by diasporic artist Nilbar Güreş, a Turkish artist who lives and works in Vienna. Güreş' artwork explores female identity, the relationships between women and domestic/public spaces, as well as intersectional, transnational and transcultural queer identity. Güreş uses video and photography to tell the story of her friend Didem, a transgender woman who was continually discriminated against and aggressively harassed for being queer in Turkey. In the installation, a one-channel video shows Didem standing defiantly in the centre of the frame, arms crossed as she stares into the camera, meeting the viewers gaze (Figure 14.8). Behind her is a rectangular textile with deep orange and red patterns that frames her head like a halo. The video slowly zooms in on Didem while a low guttural sound reverberates through the speakers. She stands still throughout the video, making each scene reminiscent of a photograph capturing a moment in time. It is only in moments when the wind gently blows through her hair or with fluttering blinks of her eyelashes that the audience realises that Didem is actively present and standing witness by looking back at the viewer. The video ends with Didem walking away from the frame and revealing the full textile that was partially hidden behind her. Hanging on the rooftop balcony in Didem's hometown of Izmir, the viewer sees a large tear in the textile, once concealed by Didem's presence in the frame. This slash tells the tragic story of when Didem was brutally dragged into a car in Istanbul, robbed and almost murdered when attackers slit her throat. In the textile, Güreş uses scissors to cut a large, elongated hole in the shape of the scar on Didem's neck. According to Güreş, the cut in the cloth 'references the violent emptiness of society that tries to cover itself up through its victims. LGBTQAI [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Asexual, Intersex] people are the victims of hate crimes' (Cornell, Eiblmayr and Schmutz, 2018, p.78).



Considering Güreş' artwork in relation to Hellu's and Rasti's visual art brings interesting connections and frictions to the notion of queer diaspora. In *Törn*, Nilbar Güreş is creating art from the diaspora about the trauma and violence her queer loved ones experience in her homeland of Turkey. Laurence Rasti is creating art from the diaspora about queer migration, and the struggle for queer refugees from Iran patiently waiting for asylum from their transit zones in Turkey. Jamil Hellu produces visual art from the diaspora about the history of colonial violence and sexual imperialism relating to his Syrian heritage. These examples provide a rich site to interrogate: What makes an artwork queer? What makes an artwork diasporic? If 'diasporic art' as a didactic and visual category demands that the art itself be produced in the diaspora, this signals that the artists' diasporic identity is the driving force in determining the diasporic nature and content of the art. When asking what makes an artwork queer, similar slippages happen to the logic that governs our understanding of complex formations of race, sexuality and visibility. Does the queerness of an artwork lie in the queer content of the artwork or in the queerness of the artist? One then has to question the reductive nature to categorise and delimit certain visual practices as belonging to 'gay art' or 'minority art' and instead see the potential of queer diasporic formations. When freed from the disciplinary and academic distinctions between discursive categories such as 'queer' or 'diasporic', queer diasporic visual practices that foreground the personal can 'create deeply affective counter-archives of regional (un)belonging' (Gopinath, 2018, p. 11), regardless of place. Gayatri Gopinath's newest study on the aesthetic practices of the queer diaspora teaches us that asking these questions and creating these disciplinary ruptures within our logics illuminate the unexpected convergences between seemingly disparate sites of analysis. In particular, part of the rubric for the 'aesthetic practices of the queer diaspora' that Gopinath puts forth is the unexpected convergences between

the interrogation of the visual field and the limits of a politics of visibility and representation, on the one hand, and on the other hand queerness as an optic and reading practice that brings alternative modes of affiliation and relationality into focus.

(*ibid.*, p. 10)

### **Diasporic bodies and queer world-making**

To better situate these artistic expressions and literature within ideas of a queer diaspora, it is useful to think of identity formation in relation to queer world-making. This means reassessing the gatekeeping mechanisms that have dictated some bodies as queer, diasporic, both and, depending on the transnational context, neither. As this analysis of contemporary visual art illustrates, queerness finds a way to dwell and remain in seemingly 'inhospitable' places like the Middle East, Africa and Asia. It begs the question: who defines queer hospitality? The answer, of course, is Western queerness and its unquestionable authenticity. The frictions and tensions that queer bodies can have within the Middle East might be lessened in other locales, but these places can be sites in which diasporic bodies are the source of racial tensions and violence. The queer diaspora is often the queer black and brown body, and the process of racialisation, as well as sexualisation, is the site where the queer diaspora is constituted. To demystify the fallacy that it is contradictory to be both brown and queer, it is vital to challenge the concept of stable or fixed identities that foreclose other ways of being. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (2004) argues that cultural hybridity results from various forms of colonisation and leads to cultural collisions and interchanges. In the attempt to assert colonial power and to create civilised subjects, 'the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid' (*ibid.*, p. 111). This hybrid subject, or the contemporary queer diaspora,



contradicts both the attempt to fix and control indigenous cultures and the illusion of cultural authenticity or purity. Here, the notion of the in-between is relevant, for the queer diasporic is then left with opposing views of Western and non-Western sexual practices, a tense historical framing of Arab-sexual discourses, all the while being measured by Western narratives of modernity, progress and enlightened (Euro-American) sexual identity. In these performances and failures, belongings and exclusions, recognitions and disidentifications, the postcolonial queer subject articulates nation-ness in complex ways, a process that is better informed by the visual culture they produce.

## Notes

- 1 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, a historiographical emphasis makes it integral to include regions that were connected by empire, culture and language. It is worth noting that Arab is an ethno-linguistic category, identifying people who speak the Arabic language as their mother tongue. Arabs trace their national roots to the 22 member states of the League of Arab States: Egypt, Sudan, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Comoros, Morocco and Mauritania. Religiously, they include Muslims (Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites and Ismailis), Christians (Protestants, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Chaldeans, Assyrians and Maronites), and Jews. Unlike Arabs, Middle Eastern people are defined to come from countries of the Arabian peninsula: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Kuwait, Turkey, Egypt and Iran.
- 2 Orientalism is defined as the West's patronising representations of 'the East' and the overall exoticisation of the societies and peoples who inhabit countries in Asia, North Africa and the Middle East. According to Said (1979), Orientalism is inextricably tied to the imperialist societies that produced it, which makes much Orientalist work inherently political and central to power.
- 3 For instance, in her seminal book *Impossible Desires*, queer theorist Gayatri Gopinath (2005) examines film and literary texts, what she calls a public culture, to dissect the ways in which discourses of sexuality are inseparable from histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism and migration. In examining cultural texts that are produced by the South Asian diaspora, Gopinath extends the power of this cultural production as even influencing the homeland. Here, cultural texts going back and forth between homeland and diaspora then contribute to and create a shaping of both sets of cultures, falsifying the notion of diaspora only being oriented towards and dependent on homeland.
- 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 'the Middle East', and encompasses other geographic regions where Islam is dominant both religiously and culturally, such as Iran and parts of Asia (Hodgson, 1974, pp. 57–59).
- 5 The artist states that they use the Victorian-era layout of domestic spaces and furniture as a metaphor for the cultural history of sexual repression. It should be noted that the furniture design within the installation is emblematic of the work of Thomas Chippendale, an eighteenth-century Georgian furniture maker who popularised Rococo and Neoclassical furniture in Britain and the United States.
- 6 As Jasbir Puar (2007, p. 4) notes, sexual exceptionalism occurs through stagings of US nationalisms that work in tandem with a sexual othering, one that exceptionalises the identities of US citizens often in contrast to Orientalist constructions of perverse 'Muslim sexuality'. As a critique of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses, homonationalism attends to how such discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to advance civilisational discourses in some contexts, and limit the progression of the 'backwards' Other (Dryden and Lenon, 2016).
- 7 For example, 'bears' comprise of a subculture of gay men who valorise the larger, hairy body. For critical writing on gay subcultures, see Hennen (2005).

- 8 El-Rouayheb (2005, pp. 119–121) outlines detailed descriptions of how *liwāt* (sodomy) was criminalised and handled in Islamic law, specifically in the four acknowledged schools of law in the Ottoman Empire: Hanaf'i, Shafi'i, Hanbali and Maliki. Historian Dror Ze'evi (2006, pp. 168–169) also argues that historically, major conflicts about the permissibility of same-sex relations simply did not exist. Though legally frowned upon, same-sex desires were taken to be part of life and their illegality were usually ignored until modernisation (and Westernisation) led a previously invisible part of life to suddenly become an object for observation and comparison with Victorian cultural norms.
- 9 Language is one of the sites that conditions sexual experiences in the Global South. Tarik Bereket and Barry Adam's (2006) research on gay identities in Turkey contends that the contemporary concept of 'gay' is a particularly generational and classed identity category dependent on a certain social status and education level. However, in MSM (men who have sex with men) relations, for instance, terms such as 'active' and 'passive' dictate how the individual performs their masculinity and are more socially relevant categories at the local level. These ideas of masculinity scripts are relatively in line with Judith Butler's (2015) notion of performativity, reiterating a type of masculinity that serves to define an individual's identity as being either active or passive; the passive subject refuses to take on the active image of the hyper-masculinised, as it conflicts with his identity script as passive.
- 10 Homosexuality is illegal in 10 of the 18 Arab countries in Western Asia (Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen). Homosexuality is punishable by death in six of these 18 countries. All sexual orientations are legal in Bahrain, Cyprus, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Palestine, and Israel. Female homosexual activity is legal in Palestine and Kuwait; however, female homosexuality in Egypt is sporadically policed. Even though female homosexuality is less consistently punished when compared to men having sex with men, few of these countries recognise legal rights and provisions for gay individuals. Male homosexual activity is illegal and punishable by imprisonment in Kuwait, Egypt, Oman, Qatar and Syria. It is punishable by death in Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. In Yemen and Palestine, the punishment might differ between death and imprisonment depending on the act committed. For more detailed information, see Human Rights Watch (2018).
- 11 Walcott (2015, p. viii) states that 'Canada is deeply involved in exporting its homosexual rights agenda elsewhere, and even within its borders, its homosexual rights agenda differentiates across race, sexual practices, and place of "origin"'. An example of this is the inauguration of Pride House as part of the 2010 Winter Olympic Games, which were held in Vancouver and Whistler, to position Canada as a gay haven. Imagining itself as a safe space where sexual minorities (both athletes and their allies) from around the world were welcome, 'Pride House showcased Canadian (sexual) exceptionalism on a world stage' (Dryden and Lenon, 2015, p. 3).

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