Part 2

Intersectional Sexualities

Chapter 5

The When, Where, and Why of Intimacy: *Codes of Coupling* in Egyptian Contemporary Art

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Codes of Coupling (2020) is a group exhibition that opened at Gypsum Gallery in Cairo, featuring the visual art of Hassan Khan, Jonathas de Andrade, Mohamed Al-Bakeri, Mohammad Shawky Hassan, and nasa4nasa. Curated by gallery artist Mahmoud Khaled, the show takes a critical approach to "coupling" bodies as a subject and an aesthetic tool, using it to explore intimacy, gender, power, and societal codes through video, film, dance, audio, and photographic installations. In this chapter, I investigate Egyptian contemporary art as it pertains to queer identity narratives in Southwest Asia North Africa (SWANA) through the case study of the *Codes of Coupling* exhibition. Taking from feminist theorist Gayatri Gopinath's ideas on queer affinities, I use the term queer here in the sense of odd or strange to reference both non-normative gender embodiments and the sexual desires that these artworks conjure forth, and as an alternative way of seeing—a queer optic—that is enabled by the works. This queer optic brings to the fore the intimacies of multiple times, spaces, art historical traditions, bodies, desires, and subjectivities.[1]

Avant-garde exhibitions like *Codes of Coupling* can help interrogate the performance of gendered identities within Egyptian society, while also contributing to a decolonial aesthetic practice that reframes the compulsory heterosexuality associated with intimacy.[2] Looking to the exhibition's positive public reception and the visual analyses of the artworks within the show itself, I analyze the acceptability, permissibility, and illegality of same-sex intimacy within Egypt's modern sexual identity, intimacy's relationship to imperialism, and how contemporary queer visual artists disrupt normative identity narratives.

The exhibition plays with a longstanding strategy of visualizing euphemisms, which is a system of symbolism, metaphors, and cyphers within Egyptian cultural norms that seem uncontroversial in one setting but may also denote intimacy and desire in another. Visuals and aesthetics of sameness, repetition, closeness, similarity, and coupling within the exhibition are meant to create parallel ideas of coupling and sameness as gendered political acts within Egypt. These ideas are fostered through the viewership of the works. This subversive depiction of same-sex intimacy through poetic repetition produces a set of questions: what does intimacy look like? Is intimacy understood the same transnationally? How does queerness interact with notions of gender expression, religion, the body, family, the state, and community? Ultimately, the exhibition and the exhibiting artists play with gender expressions and confrontations with heteronormativity in order to openly interrogate these pressing concerns. The success of this public exhibition and the strategies of the artists to explore these themes will serve as the site of analysis to help answer some of these questions. More specifically, I will try to locate a queer methodology rooted in a postcolonial approach that is attentive to local, imperial, and colonial pressures that have previously impacted sexual discourses in the region and continue to have lasting effects.

Illegality Versus Visibility

In order to consider why a public exhibition like *Codes of Coupling* is subversive within the Egyptian art scene, it is important to discuss the historic risks to safety and the immense cost that gay subjects pay for being visible in the region. Of the eighteen Arab countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia, which include 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 illegal in ten.[3] It is punishable by death in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as well as in Iran. In Yemen and Palestine, the punishment might differ between death and imprisonment depending on the act committed.[4] All sexual orientations are decriminalized in Bahrain, Cyprus, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Israel. In Palestine, the legality of same-sex sexual activity is mixed. In the West Bank, same-sex sexual activity between men was decriminalized in 1951, while in Gaza, under the British colonial-era criminal code, same-sex sexual activity can be interpreted as illegal. Female homosexual activity is legal in Palestine and Kuwait; female

homosexuality is sporadically policed in Egypt. Even though female homosexuality is less consistently punished when compared to men having sex with men, few of these countries recognize legal rights and provisions for gay individuals. Male homosexual activity is illegal and punishable by imprisonment in Kuwait, Egypt, Oman, Qatar, and Syria.

In the Egyptian context, the de facto British occupation in 1882 of what was formally part of the Ottoman Empire generated a political nationalism that was profoundly gendered in its rhetorical and material plans for liberating the nation.[5] This Victorian (period of the reign of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, 1819–1901) meddling and reordering of gender relations in Egypt, also known as homocolonialism, meant documenting and categorizing local sexual perversions. These were deviations from the expected Victorian norm of asexual femininity, and "sexually passive women and heterosexually oriented men and women."[6] Sociologist Momin Rahman defines homocolonialism as "the deployment of LGBTIQ rights and visibility to stigmatize non-Western cultures and conversely reassert the supremacy of the Western nations and civilization."[7] Specifically, Rahman characterizes:

> Western exceptionalism as the primary political idea that is triangulated through the process of homocolonialism that institutes the opposition of Muslim cultures and sexuality politics by deploying LGBTIQ rights and visibility to punish non-Western cultures, and conversely reassert the supremacy of the home Western nations and civilization.[8]

Historian Wilson Chacko Jacob uses this logic to argue that, in the Egyptian context:

> [T]he modern nation form was from its inception a plural enactment distinguishable from, but contingent on, other discursive and material formations such as empire, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, the nation and its subject must be continuously reborn in order to persist in the world. The repetition of the conditions of reproduction ensures the stability of Egypt and the Egyptian.[9]

Gender nonconformity is different from homosexuality, as it relies on the refusal of a gender binary that excludes a multiplicity of gender expressions. However, homosexuality is a part of the sexual nonconformity that likewise destabilizes heteronormativity in society. This means that there is a link between the two in their rejection of heterosexualization in postcolonial Egyptian society. In this context, gender nonconformity is thus aligned with criminalized sexualities.

To better understand where the contemporary exhibition *Codes of Coupling* fits in to this wider narrative of homocolonialism in Egypt and the slow heterosexualization of the country, it is important to contextualize decolonization as it pertains to homosexual tolerance and liberation in SWANA. Queer theory literature on the region takes issues with the historical upset of SWANA sexualities by an intolerant western colonialism, and more recently what Joseph Massad terms the "Gay International."[10] Massad explains that Arab cultures have always expressed same-sex desires, but he warns that these homosocial and homoerotic histories should not be read through the taxonomy of homosexuality. Historian Khaled El-Rouayheb outlines very detailed descriptions of how *liwat* ("sodomy") was criminalized and handled in Islamic law, specifically in the four acknowledged schools of Sunni law in the Ottoman Empire: Hanafi, Shafi, Hanbali, and Maliki.[11] Historian Dror Ze'evi also argues that historically, major conflicts about the permissibility of same-sex relations simply did not exist.[12] Although legally frowned upon, same-sex desires were taken to be part of life, so their illegality was usually ignored until modernization (and westernization) led a previously invisible part of life to suddenly become an object for observation and comparison with Victorian cultural norms. This imperialist pressure to impose pre-defined (western) sexual identities in the SWANA region impacted the local sexual discourses that were more fluid and not identity-based, forcing a western binary gender identity model of heteronormativity onto the so-called other in SWANA.[13] At the time of this colonial contact, homosexuality was also illegal in the judicial systems of the western colonizers, and the laws instated

all over SWANA to criminalize homosexuality, including in Egypt, were imports from British and French homophobic legislation. Therefore, homosexuality as taboo and prohibited in SWANA was a relatively recent measure taken to replicate the formula of western modernity after increased contact with western travelers and imperialists in the region.

The dangers of queer visibility in Egypt can be illustrated though the Queen Boat incident in 2001, the most highly publicized crackdown on same-sex practices in any Arab country. On May 11, 2001, the police descended upon the Queen Boat, a neon-lit tourist boat moored on the Nile in Cairo and a floating discotheque that was informally known to be a hangout for allegedly gay men. The police rounded up the men, who were almost exclusively Egyptian, loaded them into state security vehicles, and hauled them off to El Azbakiyya police station in downtown Cairo. Thirty-five men were arrested, as well as seventeen others from elsewhere off the streets of Cairo, all of whom constituted what became known as the Queen Boat 52. All of those detained were tortured and subjected to invasive and humiliating forensic examinations. Abuse of the detainees appeared in the Egyptian media, which covered the case in depth, especially during the early stages. This abuse was extended to the detainees' families. That the case involved religious beliefs and morality ensured the public' s engagement.[14]

Issues with visibility at the risk of personal safety are a common threat in life as they are in the creation, study, and exhibition of same-sex desire in SWANA art. This threat calls for more attention to those moments when identity and its visual representation are misaligned, disconnected, and uncoupled. The threat to personal safety calls for more attention to these slippages for the immense risk undertaken to perform such acts of social dissidence should be seen as a protest against homophobic laws and attitudes. Some may wonder, how does a gallery openly exhibit sexual and gender nonconforming art in Egypt? The answer is codification. Gendered and sexual acts are codified in different cultures as either normative (deemed acceptable) or non-normative (prohibited and highly policed). This means that artists and galleries are able to subversively display gender and sexually nonconforming art through the use of imagery and acts that are not codified as non-normative. To further investigate what this codification looks like, Mariam Elnozahy, a journalist for the independent, liberal Egyptian online newspaper *Mada Masr*, writes of her experience at the vernissage:

> It had been a long time since I attended an afternoon opening on a Friday. As a result of the temperate weather and the patio area in Gypsum's (relatively) new location in Maadi, the exhibition opening for "Codes of Coupling" felt like a garden party, packed to the brim and topped with a buoyancy that's rare in contemporary art gallery openings. Instead of the typical side-eyes and polite nods, Gypsum's opening was filled with a warmth dictated by the necessity of physical proximity. There were greetings of hugs and kisses, squeezing through a crowd in the corridor, standing shoulder to shoulder, next to those observing a film or listening to audio.[15]

By the description, this vernissage was public, well attended, and highly anticipated. Specifically, the absence of "side-eyes and polite nods" within the space is just one example that speaks to the ways a queer community can exist in public and meaningful ways within Egyptian society. The warmth that Elnozahy speaks of within the gallery can be illustrative of how counterpublics are formed at different levels in society, and how this exhibition had the potential to congregate a queer public in relative safety. The idea of publics and counterpublics are terms social theorist Michael Warner uses in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) to describe the way that groups of people come together through the circulation of images and texts.[16] Warner's ideas of how multiple publics come into being is especially useful for thinking about how these different ways of seeing and representing the world are often in competition or even conflict with one another because they are created by different publics.

Ultimately, publics and counterpublics emerge in response to the publics that came before them. How was same-sex desire permitted to exist so openly in a public space within Egypt? Subtle intimacy is the primary subject matter depicted within and uniting the artworks of the exhibition, so it could be a valuable tool. Everyday forms of intimacy, such as holding hands or a gentle embrace, can be read by public audiences and Egyptian citizens as either normative or non-normative. The ambiguity of these socially codified behaviors of masculinity, femininity, and gender expression in general allows for this visibility because of the uncertainty of meaning. As the exhibition demonstrates, the different forms of contesting heteronormativity and subverting attempts of heterosexualization of the Egyptian public are possible when same-sex intimacy can be codified to be read as non-threatening and culturally appropriate. Codes of gendered intelligibility are culturally contingent, and are dictated by local societal attitudes towards sexuality. For example, men holding hands is common in the Arab world if they are not in a romantic or sexual relationship and are just friends. However, two men who are in a sexual relationship kissing or sitting in each other's laps might be more common in western metropolitan centers like Toronto and New York. Codes of intimacy are understood differently in a transnational context than in a culturally specific national setting. With this in mind, the codification of actions that deems intimacy acceptable in one environment and unacceptable in another raises tensions between public and private spaces. I argue that the differences in these environments are not based solely on public versus private space, because there are different transnational publics that are simultaneously implicated within this dynamic. In showcasing subversive artistic practices in plain sight, the public exhibition at Gypsum Gallery challenges the orientalist idea that Egypt's public sphere is sterile, repressed, and devoid of sexuality and eroticism.[17]

Subtlety: Reading Intimacy in between the Lines

The first work to the right of the entrance of the exhibition is Jonathas de Andrade's *2 in 1* (2010), a series of photographs and drawings depicting two attached bed frames [Figure 5.1]. The artist is the only non-native Arabic speaker among those exhibited in *Codes of Coupling*, yet this work demonstrates the subtlety necessary for visualized intimacy to be read queerly as well as normative and non-threatening. We can ask ourselves if native speaking ability has a direct relationship to the full understanding of visual social codes, since it arguably allows for a deeper understanding of nuances and subtleties between acceptable codes of conduct. This question raises issues regarding the intelligibility of queer social codes in a transnational context, as it might mean that gender, sexuality and social behaviors are codified in certain ways to have commonalities between regions. This line of inquiry can point to the ways that these codes of gendered behavior, sexual desire, and displays of intimacy are translated and interpreted through a different lens when the transnational context poses forced comparisons.

Figure 5.1: Jonathas de Andrade, *2 in 1* (detail), 2010. Twenty-eight photographs, wooden shelves, and eight technical drawings printed on tracing paper, 6 meters. Courtesy of Jonathas de Andrade.

In the photographs, two men assemble two individual bedframes that have been pushed together and are being assembled as one larger bed. The men do not physically interact with each other in any overt way, and they dress similarly with white button-up shirts and grey pleated pants. The only skin showing is the dark brown of the men's arms visible beneath their shortened sleeves. Some photographs focus on the mens' hands as they work to assemble the conjoined bed. Interestingly, the mundane act of building the bed is the code used to visualize a dynamic and thriving same-sex intimacy. Set in front of a green background so that the carpentry is the focus, the work resembles a step-by-step manual showing how to make two single beds become a double bed. Yet, the close-up photographs depicting screwdrivers held in the men's hands, drill-heads penetrating the wood, and the physical closeness of the men building the conjoined beds leads to a reading filled with double-entendres and layered meanings. Physical sex is not depicted, so the spaces of same-sex intimacy and the codes of acceptability that have led these two men to do carpentry do not raise suspicions. This means that it is socially permissible for the men in these photographs to be in proximity to each other, even in an intimate space like a bedroom. The homoeroticism of the visual double-entendres can hide in plain sight, cleverly masked as normative social codes of conduct while the intimacy is obscured by the men's labor. There is power in depicting the two beds being combined into one, for it subverts a homophobic patriarchy that prohibits two men from intimately sharing a bed. The joining of the beds is poetic, for it simultaneously references the coupling of these two men while depicting actions that are mundane and acceptable in Egyptian society. The process of building an intimate domestic unit through these apparently mechanical movements is an exercise in camouflage, persistence, and the cumulative action of building a whole from two. It is a queer sensibility of survival.

Mohamed Al-Bakeri's video *Between Men* (2019) also uses subtlety as a tool to subvert heteronormativity [Figure 5.2]. The video features two men standing in front of a white backdrop doing choreographed movements around two *ahwa* (local coffee shop) chairs in the artists' hometown of Cairo. The choreographed actions that the two men enact are socially acceptable greetings and normative bodily interactions between men, slowed down and scrutinized for the moments of touch within these interactions. Such acceptable touching between men includes hand holding, hugging, gently embracing in greeting, and linking arms.

Figure 5.2: Mohamed Al-Bakeri, *Between Men*, 2019. Video still. Courtesy of Mohamed Al-Bakeri.

The coded bodily movements generate a visual language that is recognizable even when broken down into its smallest units. Performed repeatedly, their impact, speed, and duration reaffirm the existence of a system of homosociality. The men in this video can be seen as representing Egyptian citizens that:

> [E]ngage with socially acceptable gender roles, creating narratives of self that simultaneously participate in those social ideals and defy them, emphasizing or hiding behaviors according to their need to present different social personas, but also claiming social respectability *no matter what their behavior*.[18]

Anthropologist Lisa L. Wynn states that this accepted homosociality demonstrates the moral meaning attributed to the actions made by different genders, which "is a simulacrum, in the Baudrillardian sense: a copy that has no original, a substitution of the signs of the real for the real, which is thus *more real than the real*."[19] Rooted in the quotidian actions of everyday Egyptian social interactions, Al-Bakeri's research began with recording live footage and collecting sound samples on the street, on public transportation, and in coffee shops. This social touching is abstracted within the video *Between Men*, as the sexualization of the intimacy is eclipsed by an accepted Egyptian homosociality. These fleeting gestures can be viewed as customary, as their subtlety in Al-Bakeri's video subverts the visual depiction of intimacy by dissecting normal bodily interactions. Al-Bakeri uses what would ordinarily be overlooked or dismissed to his advantage. He is articulating a greater intimacy than simply a homosociality, for the methodical process of visually breaking down

social interactions between citizens draws a link between intimate actions and the normative forms of touch that are commonplace within Egyptian customs. On the topic of codified actions of intimacy, gender theorist Magdalena Suerbaum observes that:

> [M]asculinities are communicated through actions, practices and narratives and need "others" not only as the audience, but also to serve as an abject prototype, as the "currency," as a role model or as the controlled. Masculinities are never constant and unchallenged. Rather, they require continuous demonstration and confirmation.[20]

Suerbaum's argument is thus intrinsically tied to Warner's ideas on publics and counterpublics, for there is a dependency on how a given society's actions are normalized en masse that dictates rules of acceptability and permissibility. Al-Bakeri visually showcases Egyptian social interactions deemed to be either sexual or platonic, and the ways in which gender informs how these interactions are interpreted.

In Mohammad Shawky Hassan's short film *It Was Related to Me* (2011), a similar type of subtlety is used to tell stories using allegories of good and bad, right and wrong, and morality based on Egyptian sensibilities [Figure 5.3]. The first act of the film features a woman telling the story of a little girl learning about morals. Using female pronouns to address the little girl, the woman goes on to list things that would be unacceptable, like opening her mother's purse. The little girl immediately responds, saying "wrong" in Arabic. This audio track, which sounds like a child's parable, is coupled with a slideshow of family photographs depicting two young men and their parents. The focus is placed on one of the brothers more heavily, and his school portraits stare directly at the viewer as the audio of the mother and daughter continues to explain right from wrong. The frame changes when the mother in the audio says: "she knows what's wrong, but she doesn' t know what's right." At this moment, the viewer sees a clip from a home movie of the same young man from the photographs, pointing at the viewer in a repeated gesture that makes us imagine that he himself is meant to be told what is right from wrong.

Figure 5.3: Mohammad Shawky Hassan, *It Was Related to Me*, 2011. Short film still. Courtesy of Mohammad Shawky Hassan.

According to social anthropologist Nefissa Naguib, "uncanny associations with traditions and modernity, along with contrasting meanings and coherences between men's social values […] give room for reflection, especially when the scope of men's domesticities is broadened and deepened into the idea of nurturing masculinities."[21] Hassan's video does just this by depicting family, parenthood, familiarity, and proximity: he features intimate household moments like measuring the height of a growing child, gathering for a family engagement, and sitting on a childhood couch, and he shares private home movies. Through these depictions, the role of the son and the expectations associated with being a male child within an Egyptian household are emphasized through the little girl asking her mother questions about morality. This contrast produces room for reflection on socially acceptable masculinities and socially defined and historically contingent gendered social values.

These verbally listed codes of right and wrong allow for oppressive heteronormative values to be subverted, questioning the dominant narratives of morality that are accepted as truth within Egyptian society. The subtlety in this critique of how we question the ways in which these rights and wrongs are related to heteronormative values is presented in the disjuncture in the film as it focuses on the visual of the adult male while the audio is a mother speaking to her little daughter in the first person. This rupture between what is seen versus what is heard in these moments creates a blurring between genders, and the ways in which morals and values are inherently gendered from a young age. If masculinity is the product of social performances, then these performances are dependent on their respective audiences, and therefore subject to change if context and audience are altered.[22] In the contextualization of the man on the screen as a stand-in for the little girl in the

audio, the mother saying that "she knows what's wrong, but she doesn't know what's right" points directly to the interpretation that sexual nonconformity or queerness is itself a failed attempt at distinguishing what is right from what is wrong.

Historian Lisa Pollard explains that in 1919, Egypt saw an uprising against British colonial occupation, with Egyptians fighting for independence and self-rule:

> Caring for the nation as a family had become the *sine qua non* of modern Egyptian politics by 1919. […] Men's marital behavior and domestic habits appeared central to demonstrating Egypt's readiness for self-rule […] Because the connubial relations of the Egyptian elite did not match the Victorian ideals of monogamy, the British claimed that Egyptian political and economic institutions were morally unsound. The realpolitik of British foreign policy was thus undergirded by the *moralpolitik* of domestic affairs, turning familial practices into family politics—in essence, domestic mores as measures of the ability of the nation-state to govern itself.[23]

The British used domestic norms, marital customs, gender presentation, and codes of Egyptian masculinities and femininities to classify non-western subjects as other, and to justify and shape colonial policy for ruling Egypt.[24] Upon the British invasion and subsequent occupation of Egypt in 1882, British officials used these homocolonial logics to legitimize an expansive and seemingly unwanted extension of their overseas rule, claiming that Egyptians had to be reformed before they could have self-governance. These legacies were imposed by Victorian British imperialism, and continue to hold immense weight for Egyptian gender expectations, sexuality, and the relationship of these factors to nationalism. Historical violence, political exclusion, and economic control were apparatuses used by the British to change Egyptian domestic norms into heteronormative behaviors, including marriage. Egypt must now decolonize these cemented logics and unlearn a heterosexualization of the nation that came from imperialist pressure. Ultimately, the British "logic inherent to discussions about the household dictated that political transformation [in Egypt] of any sort must stem from a thorough examination of domestic mores and required replacing some customs with new ones."[25] In a short span of time, the Victorian family and monogamy came to symbolize modernity, civility, and even the nation state, resulting in a heterosexualization in Egypt that came from new domestic and imported traditions.

Argentinian feminist philosopher María Lugones performed a close analysis of heterosexualism as a racialized system of dehumanization steeped in coloniality and modernity that is relevant to the discussion of Egypt. According to Lugones:

> [T]he heterosexualist patriarchy has been an ahistorical framework of analysis. To understand the relation of the birth of the colonial/modern gender system to the birth of […] global colonial capitalism—with the centrality of the coloniality of power to that system of global power—is to understand our present organization of life anew.[26]

There is a direct causality between the imperial domination of Egypt by the British and the French, and the current gender dynamics within Egypt that have been influenced by this history. Lugones's feminist critique demonstrates that the colonial construction and enforcement of gender frames heterosexualism as more than a social practice or sexual preference informed by normativity. Instead, it is an organizing system of dehumanization, subordination, and exploitation of colonized peoples imperative to the reproduction of colonial dominance.[27] This means that British imperialism brought forth a heterosexualization of Egyptian society as an act of modernization, which ultimately still impacts current Egyptian ideas of domestic norms, gender identity, and sexual expression. Prime examples of this lasting impact on modern domestic norms can be seen in the playful joining together of two single beds in Jonathas de Andrade's work *2 in 1*, or the dissection of social greetings and societally accepted male touch in Mohamed Al-Bakeri's video *Between Men*, or as reflected in the

gendered moral codes outlined in Mohammad Shawky Hassan's video *It Was Related to Me*. In order to decolonize the cemented logics of heteronormativity, it is urgent to reject the colonial categorization of people along a strict binary of sexual difference, and to understand that colonial science has defined sexual deviance in relation to European cultural traditions that historically criminalized homosexuality at the time of imperial contact with Egypt.

Context: Where and Why Intimacy Is Permissible

An important facet of the exhibition *Codes of Coupling* is the public display of same-sex desire and intimacy in Cairo, in this case at the Gypsum Gallery. The exhibition and its artworks question the lines of acceptability and permissibility when it comes to visualizing and depicting gender and sexuality. Through the plurality of gender and sexual expression articulated in the works of the exhibiting artists, orientalist understandings of the region are rejected. Rather, this exhibition demonstrates the varied, dynamic, activist, artistic, and community-driven initiatives that continue to thrive in Egypt, and those which actively reject a patriarchal system that suppresses the rights of others. In feminist theorist Dina Georgis's notable study, *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East*, she asks:

> [H]ow might we account for how individuals live their lives in conflict or in negotiation with culture and tradition? Must we read same-sex Arab sexualities as either frighteningly homogenous or as sellouts to western hegemony? What about making conceptual room for a "middle passage," as Paul Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*, for the reality of sexualities conceived in a gray zone, lived somewhere between east and west?[28]

As Georgis goes on to explain, these sexualities are in transition and resist easy naming; a feature of postcoloniality could be the condition of having to negotiate worlds.[29]

The conceptual "middle passage" of sexuality discourses born out of and solidified in the "gray zone" of postcolonialism, decolonization, and modern Egyptian nationalist formations becomes an important site of self-actualization. Perhaps within this grey zone is the articulation of the individual queer or gender variant figure, as well as the inclusion of the wider economy of acceptability that exists between all citizens. Same-sex desire and queerness is not articulated within a vacuum, and is instead the relationality of intimacy between heteronormative values and homosocial cultural codes. How, then, has a history of homosociality within the Middle East throughout pre-modern history impacted modern Egypt, which now uses state violence and oppression to promote a compulsory heterosexuality? Suerbaum understands the construction of Egyptian masculinities, and masculinity in general, as being "an active process that features the illusion of coherence and the aim to cover incongruities, as well as ongoing assessment and evaluation of accepted and idealized images."[30] This dismantling of the gendered order in society, which makes certain masculitinities and feminities acceptable and others unacceptable, is precisely the transgressive work that the *Codes of Coupling* exhibition does. These exhibited works demonstrate the falsity of gender and sexual cohesion within Egyptian society, by creating room for intimacy outside of heteronormativity through the subversion of idealized images of sexual desire.

The simulacrum necessary for gendered actions to be identified, accepted, and repeated was embodied in the performance of Cairo-based dance collective nasa4nasa during *Codes of Coupling*. Dancers Noura Seif Hassanein and Salma Abdel Salam, the female choreography duo of nasa4nasa, used their gymnastics and martial arts-trained dancing bodies to explore symmetrical traces as a mode of closeness:

> Performed outside, cornered by a halo of people pushed up against each other, practically sitting on each other's laps to witness the duo's delicate, slow movements. In the empty corner space left by the crowd, they moved gently and carefully in unison. With studied exactitude, they mimicked one another in parallel—never touching, rarely facing each other, never intersecting.[31]

Their performance questioned what it means for two female bodies to move in unity by engaging aspects of closeness and proximity, disjunction, continuity, and the ever-present gap between two bodies; through repetition, nasa4nasa's choreography revealed bodily intimacy and closeness that was laid bare and experienced through a fluid, movement-based language of togetherness through synchronized actions. The homosociality of this choreography does not pander to a straight male gaze, and the dance creates a space for female same-sex desire to be explored through the lens of closeness, companionship, and partnership. This performance at once diverts female same-sex desire away from a hyper-sexualized lesbian trope and subverts the assumed patriarchy within Egyptian society that works to silence female sexual desire. In this way, the subtlety of the gestures these two women make within the performance engage transnational publics, the expectations for women in Egyptian society, and acceptable codes of intimacy for female same-sex desire.

Sexuality can be understood through queer affect, which Georgis describes as a method that centers on the affect of pain to teach us the suffering of those negotiating homosexual desires under impossible conditions.[32] Queer affect is what makes sexualities and love encounters possible, even when a culture deems them wrong: for

> while political discourses of nationhood have profound material implications, they do not explain relationality outside of economies of meaning, which is to say in encounters where the pain of difference arises in ways that cannot be explained through bonds of community.[33]

Ultimately, how do we understand the ways that Eros interacts with our day-to-day and political lives and spaces? Egypt's focus on maintaining a heterosexist society has historically forced same-sex encounters to remain unnamed and invisible. Because heterosexuality became the unspoken norm, "sexual difference […] has no language because it is not socially sanctioned."[34] When queerness exists within the margins of a society that suppresses gender expression outside of prescribed norms, certain actions become powerful tools to make visible that which has been silenced. These actions can be read as the gestures within Mohamed Al-Bakeri's video *Between Men*, or the action of joining two beds together in Jonathas de Andrade's *2 in 1*. These actions can be seen within the slippages created in Mohammad Shawky Hassan's short film *It Was Related to Me*, in his demonstrations of the incommensurability of same-sex intimacy within an openly homosocial society.[35] The artworks and artists of the *Codes of Coupling* exhibition identify the invisibility of queer subjectivity in modern Egyptian society, and participate in loud resistance via acts of queer expression through subtle gestures. These artists make same-sex desire the primary lens. Returning to Georgis, she describes queerness as the part of us that refuses to be colonized into normative subjects:

> [I]n aesthetic expression, these parts become visible in adjectives, which is to say in expressions and formations that exceed our everyday meanings and intelligible social identities—our basic reality of nouns and verbs. Queer thus becomes the site of the unthought sexual and, in this way, is the perverse.[36]

Thus, the aesthetics of intimacy within *Codes of Coupling* make visible the typically invisible descriptions, expressions, and formations of same-sex desire and gender expression. The use of subtly queer visual aesthetics makes possible depictions of gender nonconformity that have been made invisible within language and discourse, giving new meanings and possibilities to the silenced sexual identities within Egyptian society.

Policing of Queer Visibility in Egypt

It is important to keep in mind the state apparatuses that contribute to the heterosexualization project of modern Egypt. According to Julian Awwad, Egypt "relies on the constitution of gay subjectivity to justify its persecution of same-sex practitioners. This constitution is informed by Egypt's postcolonial condition, which, in turn, has increasingly become informed by the exigencies of neoliberal globalization."[37] This means that the formal acknowledgement and open self-identification of queer subjects becomes an important factor used to justify state-sanctioned homophobia in Egypt. Awwad indicates that Egypt's postcoloniality in an era of globalization becomes relevant for assessing how homophobic laws can be used to identify the ways in which Egyptian cultural norms shape the illegal constitution of gay subjectivity.

Sarah Hegazi (d. 2020), an LGBTQIA+ activist from Egypt, is remembered as an inspiring symbol of resistance and bravery by mourners around the world. Hegazi was imprisoned in the fall of 2017 after waving a rainbow pride flag associated with LGBTQ liberation at a concert in Cairo by the Lebanese band Mashrou' Leila, whose lead singer Hamed Sinno is openly gay [Figure 5.4]. The sight of the flag being so prominently displayed at the concert outraged the Egyptian establishment and ignited a three-week anti-gay crackdown by the authorities, in which Hegazi was the only woman arrested. In interviews, Hegazi said she was tortured by the Egyptian government using electric shock for three months before her release on bail.[38] Fearing her eventual prosecution as an openly gay woman in a country that routinely targets and charges its gay citizens with crimes of debauchery and blasphemy, Hegazi fled to Canada.[39] She spoke of the unrelenting trauma caused by her imprisonment and torture after she sought asylum in Canada, but she described her life away from Egypt marked not by relief or a sense of sanctuary, but of nightmares, depression, and panic attacks. Hegazi's beloved mother died of cancer a month after she landed in Canada, and she was debilitated by grief and severe loneliness after being separated from her younger siblings, who remained in Egypt. She said that "Home is not land and borders. It's about people you love […] Here in Canada, I haven't people, I haven't family, I haven't friends. So I'm not happy here."[40] While grateful for the protection from persecution provided in Canada, Hegazi said she dreamed of returning to her homeland to continue her fight against discrimination, western imperialism, and capitalism. Sarah Hegazi died by suicide at the age of 30, because of a misogynist police force, homophobic Egyptian laws, and asylum in far-off Canada, where she did not have the resources she needed to cope with her immense trauma. For Hegazi and asylum seekers like her, the image of the west as a haven of sexual diversity and support is often a myth supported by western exceptionalism. This myth relies on detaching homonational rhetoric from hate crimes in Canada, homophobic laws and legislation, and the increased violence that queer people, especially Indigenous queer people and queer people of color, face at the hands of police.[41] Today, Sarah is remembered as a symbol of resistance, and as a person who suffered bigotry, discrimination, and injustice for celebrating sexual and gender diversity within Egypt.

Figure 5.4: Sarah Hegazi waving a rainbow flag at a Mashrou' Leila concert in Egypt, Twitter (now X), posted October 1, 2020. Courtesy of Amr Magdi/Twitter.

Sarah Hegazi was imprisoned for waving a gay pride flag at a concert in Egypt. What makes the rainbow flag, an open marker of queer visibility, cause for legal persecution, but the exhibition at Gypsum Gallery, also visibly queer, less so? Does waving a pride flag in public carry similar risks to hosting a public exhibition? Or does the codification of signs, symbols, and aesthetic forms lead the pride flag to be met with violence and derision in Egypt, while the images within *Codes of Coupling* can garner a successful show with a well-attended vernissage? Is it the aesthetics of queerness that prescribe and define visual forms that viewers can easily read as queer? The codification of signs and how we simultaneously read queerness transnationally and locally creates slippage. The artists were using ambiguous signs while Hegazi used a pride symbol that was unambiguous in either national or transnational contexts. Arguably, the fact that the image of Hegazi waving the pride flag in public circulated on the Internet, a much more open and widely accessible public space than an art gallery, elicited this reaction, because her gesture was made more visible. However, the public exhibition, even if less public than the images of Hegazi waving a rainbow flag circulating the Internet, could have been raided and shut down for anything the Egyptian government deemed out of line with their norms and customs. Because of this, both actions of resistance (and queer self-actualization) should be seen as dissent, and as instances of protest that reject

heteropatriarchy and displace homophobia. In Arabic, the term *mu'arada* is often used to signify dissidence, resistance, and opposition, although there is no exact translation of the English term dissent. *Mu'arada* reminds us of the interconnected nature of these words, all of which are related to acts of protest.[42] Ultimately, it is through subtlety, narrative storytelling, and juxtaposition that the artworks within Gypsum Gallery's exhibition *Codes of Coupling* come alive with resistance and protest. It is through the abstraction of gestures and greetings, and the reimagining of bedframe schematics that queer subjectivity comes alive in its boldness. Subtlety can be seen as an immensely powerful tool in this exhibition, used to amplify the expressions of same-sex intimacy, and it demonstrates a queer visibility that can subvert social norms in a postcolonial Egyptian context.

Notes

1 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

2 Compulsory heterosexuality is the theory that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced upon people by a patriarchal and heteronormative society. The term was popularized by Adrienne Rich. See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5.4 (1980): 631–60.

3 Muslim-majority countries like Tunisia and Algeria are not always included in the commonly accepted list of Arab countries because of their distinct location in the Maghrib (North Africa); Turkey and Iran and Israel are also not included for linguistic and religio-cultural reasons. Arab is an ethno-linguistic category used to identify people who speak the Arabic language as their mother tongue. Most Arabs trace their national roots to the 22 members 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, Morroco, and Mauritania. Their religious self-identifications include but are not limited to Islam (Sunni, Shi'i, Alawite, and Ismaili), Christianity (Protestant, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Chaldean, Assyrian, and Maronite), and Judaism. In contrast, people described as Middle Eastern are frequently connected with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Kuwait, Turkey, Egypt, and sometimes Iran.

4 See Human Rights Watch, "Audacity in Adversity: LGBT Activism in the Middle East and North Africa," April 16, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/04/16/audacity-adversity/lgbt-activism-middle-east-and-north-africa#:~:text=The%20report%20provides%20context%20for,%2Dtreatment%2C%20forced%20anal%20examinations%2C.

5 Egypt was most recently a British colony as of 1882 and a British protectorate in 1914; the last British troops departed from the Suez Canal Zone in 1956. On gendered nationalist plans, see Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing and Liberating Egypt 1805–1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 73–99. For the abridged version, see Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 17.

6 Momin Rahman and Stevi Jackson, *Gender and Sexuality: Sociological Approaches* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 22.

7 Ibid., 7.

8 Ibid., 118

9 Jacob, *Working Out Egypt*, 17.

10 Joseph Massad defines the "Gay International" as the missionary universalization of western gay rights. Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

11 Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World 1500–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 119–21.

12 Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East 1500–1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 168–69.

13 On the imposition of European ideas on non-western cultures, see Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York; London: Routledge, 1992).

14 For a more detailed analysis on gay rights in Egypt in relation to the Queen Boat travesty, see the analysis by legal scholar Julian Awwad, "The Postcolonial Predicament of Gay Rights in the Queen Boat Affair," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7.3 (2010): 318–36.

15 Mariam Elnozahy, "Subtle Intimacies: On Gypsum Gallery's 'Codes of Coupling'," *Mada Masr*, February 27, 2020, https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/02/27/feature/culture/subtle-intimacies-on-gypsum-gallerys-codes-of-coupling/.

16 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

17 My use of the term ''erotic'' is informed by the work of Sharon Holland. It does not anchor itself in the psychoanalytic, and instead fluctuates between standard 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, thereby demonstrating the way in which sexuality is inextricable from the erotic itself. See Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 9.

18 Lisa L. Wynn, *Love, Sex, and Desire in Modern Egypt: Navigating the Margins of Respectability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 8. Emphasis original.

19 Ibid. Emphasis original.

20 Magdalena Suerbaum, *Masculinities and Displacement in the Middle East: Syrian Refugees in Egypt* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), 17.

21 Nefissa Naguib, *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 3.

22 Suerbaum, *Masculinities and Displacement*, 17.

23 Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 2–3.

24 On normative Victorian family ideals, see Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

25 Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation*, 5.

26 María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22.1 (2007): 187.

27 On the application of María Lugones's theories to different postcolonial contexts, see Madi Day, "Remembering Lugones: The Critical Potential of Heterosexualism for Studies of So-Called Australia," *Genealogy* 5.3 (2021): 71.

28 Dina Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 119–20.

29 Ibid.

30 Suerbaum, *Masculinities and Displacement*, 17.

31 Elnozahy, "Subtle Intimacies."

32 Georgis, *The Better Story*, 126.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 131.

35 The Arabic word *jins* ("type," "kind" [related to genus]; "national origin," "ethnolinguistic origin") began to carry new meanings associated with biological sex some time in the early twentieth century. As late as 1870, the connotation of sex had not yet come into usage; an unspecific word for sexuality, *jinsiyya* (lit. "nationality," "citizenship"; later associated with sexual identity) was popularized in the 1950s by translators of the works of Austrian neurologist and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. See Joseph Andoni Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14.2 (2002): 372, https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-2-361. Since the twentieth century, Arabic-speaking activists have been working to decolonize this linguistic legacy, and have developed queer terminology to replace such categorizing terminology that is deemed homophobic. These terms include: *mithliyya* ("lesbian"); *mithli* ("gay"); *muzdawajin* ("bisexual"); *muta?awilin* ("transgender"); *mughayyirin* or *ahrar al-jins* ("queer").

36 Dina Georgis, *The Better Story*, 118.

37 Julian Awwad, "The Postcolonial Predicament," 319.

38 Nick Boisvert, “LGBTQ Activist Sarah Hegazi, Exiled in Canada after Torture in Egypt, Dead at 30,” Canadian Broadcast Corporation News, June 16, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/sarah-hegazi-death-1.5614698.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Jasbir Puar notes that sexual exceptionalism occurs through the staging of US nationalisms, for example those that work in tandem with a sexual othering, or that exceptionalize the identities of US citizens by adhering to orientalist constructions of a perverse Muslim sexuality. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4. 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 civilizational discourses in some contexts, and limit the progression of the backwards other. See OmiSoore H. Dryden and Suzanne Lenon, eds, *Disrupting Queer Inclusion: Canadian Homonationalisms and the Politics of Belonging* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016).

42 Alexa Firat and Shareah Taleghani, *Generations of Dissent: Intellectuals, Cultural Production, and the State in the Middle East and North Africa* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020), 6.

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Chapter 6

The Vicissitudes of Self: Storytelling, Queerness, and Muslim Identity

Yasmine K. Kasem

Oppressed under excessive heat, a man traveling stops for water only to find a woman forlorn. She is mourning the departure of her spouse, whose withdrawal she blames on "the vicissitudes of fortune."[1] Her husband caught her in an affair with a slave girl from Oman and swiftly left upon seeing them together. This story, "The Lovers of Bassorah," is contained within *Alf Layla wa Layla*, also known as *1001 Arabian Nights* [Figure 6.1]. At first glance, this short narrative reads as a warning: sexual deviancy, perhaps homosexuality, leads to trouble and rejection. This narrative is one familiar to anyone who dares straddle the seeming divide between Islam and queerness, yet its presence is encouraging, indicating that there is a history where the two were not so estranged as they are portrayed today.

Figure 6.1: Yasmine K. Kasem, *The Lovers of Bassorah* (mock-up, from the series Behind Closed Doors), 2021. Digital collage. Courtesy of Yasmine K. Kasem.

Alf Layla wa Layla exhibits the power of storytelling and the influence the narrator can have over their audience. In the main arc of the story, King Shahryar is on a serial rampage of uxoricide, partially motivated by his previous wife's infidelity. Each night, he marries a new woman, and each morning she is executed. His deranged and unhinged actions eventually threaten Shahrazad, the daughter of his advisor, who volunteers to wed the king herself.[2] She explains her plan to stay alive to her protesting father: she will tell the king engaging stories each night, but end on a cliffhanger at daybreak so the king will need to keep her alive to hear the resolution.[3] Shahrazad's storytelling was driven not only by self-preservation, but also by her desire to preserve the lives of others. Every night she lived, another woman (a potential wife) was spared, and by the end of the 1001 nights of stories, King Shahryar had grown to love Shahrazad and ceased his violence. *Alf Layla wa Layla* demonstrates that storytelling has far-reaching effects beyond entertainment or teaching morals and lessons through characters. Shahrazad tells stories in the defense of lives and against irrational violence. In telling these stories, she softens the heart of her oppressor who holds power over many women's lives.

In striding towards a harmonious life, this queer history acted as a spark of validation for my identity when I realized I was a queer Arab Muslim. Like any human being, I am driven by self-preservation and validation. Storytelling plays a major part in these ventures, as a powerful force that can forge the narratives that drive others' perceptions, including those who have power over us and over the acceptability of certain relationships. Additionally, storytelling also influences how one sees oneself. Like many people, I was told the narrative that my culture and religion and my queerness were mutually

exclusive identities. I was told that some of those identities are bad, even evil. However, which identity is bad depends on the narrator, who might persuade others to believe their side of the story. Just as storytelling can be used to perpetuate harmful binary narratives, it can also disrupt them and create spaces that expand beyond the margins.

Visual art is a type of storytelling. However, it is not always as easy to discern a visual narrative's meaning as it might be from reading a page or listening to a recitation of a song or poem. I did not previously consider myself to be an artist who utilizes narrative in the same way as Shahrazad, but that is because I was thinking about my art practice too didactically. As a friend pointed out, my work is conceived in a narrative fashion, from the research to the material. Looking at my works and practice as a whole, I realize that I am not telling stories about the intersections of identity, hybridity, history, and politics only because I find them interesting. I also make art to tell the story of myself in the hope that it too will be added to the collection of narratives from our current era, to quell the hearts of those who are malicious and powerful, and perhaps, if I am lucky, to get them to fall in love with me as well.

Defiance

There is something innately wonderful about being queer, something special that I think heteronormativity withholds, namely, acceptance of change, and acceptance of the abstract and deviant. Against all stigma held against queerness, I will celebrate the acceptance of change and expansive-mindedness that comes with queerness—how the "complications" of identity attributed to intersections of sex, gender, and desire are not complicated at all, especially when compared to the relative structures of heteronomative hegemony developed in the name of normalcy and nature. These structures are time and time again challenged by the deviancy of queerness. In a much-reproduced zine essay, the Wisconsin-based Mary Nardini Gang elucidates:

> Some will read "queer" as synonymous with "gay and lesbian" or "LGBT." This reading falls short. While those who would fit within the constructions of "L," "G," "B" or "T" could fall within the discursive limits of queer, queer is not a stable area to inhabit. Queer is not merely another identity that can be tacked onto a list of neat social categories, nor the quantitative sum of our identities. Rather, it is the qualitative position of opposition to presentations of stability—an identity that problematizes the manageable limits of identity. Queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white hetero monogamous patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalized, otherized and oppressed. Queer is the abnormal, the strange, the dangerous. Queer involves our sexuality and our gender, but so much more. It is our desire and fantasies and more still. Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal.[4]

Mary Nardini Gang's definition of queer has helped me reframe how I see myself in conjunction with the systems and communities I feel tension from. I could not put it better than they have. Since coming out to myself as a queer Muslim, I long believed the narrative that was told to me: "You can't have both. There's no room for both." To be and to embrace publicly all the aspects of myself would be a constant struggle, a jihad against the temptation to submit and relinquish one identity for another, to exist in a precarious liminal space, since there was no room for me elsewhere. However, the concept of hybridity allows for telling this narrative in a new way. No longer am I obscurity teetering towards collapse: I am a hybrid defiance to binary systems and narratives. The power of the narrative lies in the breath of the storyteller. If I exist in a state of defiance, I can reject a narrative that denies me. So, I will tell my story as an act of defiance.

I am liminal.

I am hybrid.

I am Muslim, Queer, and a half-Arab Woman.

I am defiance.

I have a deep desire to be engulfed in Arab-Muslim culture. There are traditions and pop culture jokes I cannot understand on Instagram, because I was not effectively taught to speak Arabic at a young age and grew up largely isolated from peers who shared a similar background. The fantasy I have constructed of Arab and Muslim communities from social media is one that is both familiar and yet also distant, influenced by doom scrolling through post after post of memes and videos I use to measure my validity as Arab, Muslim, or both. I see myself and my life in many of these memes, and yet I often feel like an imposter because I do not see queerness represented in this space without consequence. I understand that social media meme pages are not the healthiest ways to validate oneself, but they are the most easily accessible, especially in isolation.

I was writing and developing this work within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The queer spaces I would frequent were hushed and hibernating. The prior distance I felt from them made me notice how important they are in my life. But, I had also gained new spaces. Zoom meetings with queer Muslim and Arab groups and collectives introduced me to and put me in connection with individuals I would have never met otherwise. Still, it was like a carrot hovering before me as I felt an innate lack of intimacy in these spaces. Screens are a powerful force, yet also not enough.

In defiance of the doubts about the validity of my identity, regarding the queer and Muslim communities separately, I must also defy my own imposter syndrome. Because if I don't believe in the validity of my right to be in both spaces, the narrative I reject will overpower me.

Process

The process of making art is a story as much as the artwork itself is a story. My practice is monotonous, an unraveling of a constrained fluff that is expanded and made vulnerable through a quasi-woven method. I lay out the strands piece by piece, layering alternating vertical and horizontal fibers without them interlacing just to make a blank sheet for the image to reside. I vaguely remember a professor saying something along the lines of: "When you use the wrong tool for the wrong job, the outcome is art."

This could also be a figment of my imagination, but it has become a mantra to guide my practice. This idea of a "wrong tool" and the "wrong job" making something potentially beautiful and valuable is a contradiction of the "two wrongs don't make a right" proverb. The wrong tool for the wrong job is an act of queering that challenges the normative state or purpose of a tool or material. The queering can involve a process, a material, or both. Deviating from the tool's or material's intended use for the purpose of something as strange as the act of art making is queer in nature. It is an act of defiance against the normative. Although art has become a cornerstone of society and culture with popular forms canonized over time, artists continue to push the boundaries of what is considered art, ever expanding the options, perspectives, and stories we share and how they are consumed.

My practice reflects this boundary-pushing in the choice and use of materials. Often, a material has a story or history of its own. Between 2018–23, I predominantly used cotton piping in my work. I define this material as queer in relation to my own experience of being queer. It is an ambiguous material, often passing as rope to the untrained eye. It is intended to be hidden inside the hem of a textile or upholstery to create a rounded edge. I unravel and unleash the fluff inside the spun, threadbare net and strip it into strands that I weave into large fragile textiles, like papyrus in look and bandaging in texture.

Using boiling hot water, fat, and friction, I wet felt the fibers together to give the new material body some integrity and strength. It is a practice of unraveling and re-making: using the wrong material for the wrong job. In artmaking, the material or process is the instrument that delivers the narrative. Like a palimpsest, aspects of the material's origins remain in its new form, and so do traces of what it has been through. The trio of a material's origin, trauma, and resolution have all coalesced in the making of a new object, which is the basic recipe for any story.

My exercise of queering materials in a narrative fashion started years ago when Death pounced upon a dear friend suddenly and unexpectedly. My friend's passing was traumatic, not only in its suddenness, but also the controversy surrounding his identity. We would talk frequently about the labor behind maintaining our identities, and the fear of being outed, while harboring a great desire to be out and celebrating who we were. He taught me how to code switch, and to read who would be trustworthy enough to know what was hidden. At the end of our time together, I had only recently become aware of my own queerness, but I understood the struggle and weight of identifying as Muslim and queer in Arab culture. However I had not felt this weight myself until he passed. I was haunted by lingering questions from family, friends, and strangers. I began to think of my own ephemerality. I was not yet out to my father, nor any of my family in Egypt. The promise of Death and its prowling prompted me to consider: would my father be ashamed of me if I was also taken too soon? Should I try to cover who I was? Would I be mourned, yet also silenced in death like my friend? I felt as if I was untethering from who I understood myself to be, and on the edge of collapse. In an act of mourning and therapy, I made a series of cathartic experiments that pushed materials to their limit through time- and tension-based works out of paper and piping that would eventually self-destruct. I was guided by prompts:

Q: How many red bricks can this paper hammock hold before collapsing?

A: 38 bricks for 10 minutes.

I felt shark-like, ripping apart the unknown object before me to learn what it was. The act appealed to the morbid curiosity of potentially ripping my identity apart. I began a practice of unraveling cotton piping and creating a new material body out of the woven forms, favoring the resulting delicate, fragile, and ghostly presence. The piping maintained its ambiguous properties after its unraveling. In its new form, it lost its utility and expected purpose as an upholstery material. Now unrecognizable to its former self, the material composition existed without functionality for any use other than to be art. The breaking of its former self did not render it obsolete or trash; it did not lose itself. It became a new version of itself, and only for that new purpose. Defying its own material narrative, it too is queer.

The weavings became a surrogate body with which to hold the dense, heavy anxiety and turmoil I was experiencing because of my desire to embrace Islam and my ethnicity and sexual orientation, all while hindered by dominant heteronormative narratives often employed in Islam and Arab culture. The fear of rejection was a constant looming despair. It was the fear that the Muslim community I was already deeply intimidated by, due to insecurity in how I practiced, would disown me. I also feared my father's rejection. He is in some ways my unofficial artistic advisor and taught me to be proud of my religion and heritage in a time and place where the world seemed only to want me to feel ashamed of who I was. Through my work, I could temporarily remove my worries, place them into the woven bodies, and let them prophesize my fate. I read each work as myself, struggling to stay together, finding beauty in their fragility and resistance to submitting to the conditions of their installation.

Just as coming out affects relationships, it also deeply affected the content, presentation, and process of my art practice. I had been working on a piece for an exhibition about feeling disconnected from my Egyptian family and heritage. Through

the topic of sustainability assigned to me by the San Diego Art Institute, I proposed a piece to the curator about my Siti (grandmother) and how we are connected through material. I was halfway through the work when I came out to my father. Although my experience was favorable, I would have felt unburdened even if he had rejected me. For years, my work had been developing under the weight of imposter syndrome and an identity crisis. I had to speak in code when discussing the queer themes of my work in any public forum, hoping the queer aspects of my work would come through and be visible to my queer audience, while I also obscured those ideas under abstracted Islamic art aesthetics.

The use of abstraction in my work was intended to confuse surveillance. After coming out, I didn't know what to do with myself. I had been loaded with the burden of the secret of my identity for so long that not having a weight or looming threat to impair me was, in a way, scary. Making work in the way that I had for so long relieved pressure, but now there was nothing to conceal. It didn't make sense to continue that practice, and it was as if my muse had left me. I had to start over, and starting over is scary indeed.

Behind Closed Doors

Culture is a measure of society and its values, and, like the people and events that contribute to it, culture is a living, breathing concept. Desiring to make sense of how culture comes to be the way it is in the present, I often look to the past. This led me to *Alf Layla wa Layla*. My interest in this collection was based on the breadth of its stories and ambiguity of their authorship.

In *The Sexual World of the Arabian Nights* (2018), author David Ghanim analyzes the husband's reaction in "The Lovers of Bassorah." Upon witnessing his wife's affair, the husband leaves without explanation. Ghanim suggests that "promiscuity, regardless of gender, is the credible cause of deserting the lover rather than the condemned lesbianism."[5] The various characters' attitudes towards non-heteronormative activity allow room to question how typical this situation was, and specifically how queer relationships were perceived in the medieval Islamic context in the SWANA region.

This is not the only story in *Alf Layla wa Layla* that features queer relationships between women that ultimately resolve in some form of tragedy. In his book, Ghanim concludes that "Lesbian tendencies are stigmatized, particularly in a context of otherness."[6] Although true, this statement also acknowledges the existence of queer women in the context of the story's time and place. History's view on women is consistently unfavorable, especially since most surviving writing has been done by men. The negative tone accompanying lesbian relationships in *Alf Layla wa Layla* indicates lesbianism's threat to androcentric and patriarchal societies. I argue that this is because of the absence and/or indifference of men in a lesbian relationship. Part of my series on select tales in *Alf Layla wa Layla* employs imagination to illuminate the lesser-heard voices in this history. The existence of these stories in a single text supports the notion that these types of relationships were common enough to be observed and written into various narratives, making visible the history of queerness in Islamic and SWANA societies.

The first story that caught my eye and set me down the path of a new art series was "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman," which, in part, tells the bewildering tale of Lady Budur.[7] After being abandoned by her new husband Prince Kamar al-Zaman while traveling with a large caravan, Budur dons a fake beard and dresses in her husband's clothes. For her own protection as a woman traveling alone with a royal caravan, she takes advantage of her likeness to her missing husband to disguise herself. The party ends up in the realm of Sultan Armanus who, duped by her disguise, pressures her to marry his daughter Hayat al-Nufus. Budur marries her and becomes sultan, but to avoid consummating the new marriage (which would surely blow her cover), she performs extra devotional acts such as prayer until daybreak. On the third night, Hayat al-Nufus meets

her with scorn and confusion regarding the failure to consummate the marriage and warns Budur of her father's irritation and potential retaliation. Budur eventually reveals herself as a woman, and yet Hayat al-Nufus is sympathetic. Furthermore, the fact that Lady Budur is a woman does not seem to inhibit Hayat al-Nufus's desire for intimacy: "Then they toyed and embraced and kissed and slept till near the Mu'ezzin's call to dawn-prayer, when Hayat al-Nufus arose and took a pigeon-poult, and cut its throat over her smock and besmeared herself with its blood."[8] This last act was to convince the household that the new couple had engaged in intercourse.

This night, which begins with Budur and Hayat al-Nufus wracked with anxiety, ends with sincere intimacy that I found alluring. This story eventually takes darker turns, but I want it to end there with their embrace, imagining they lived happily ever after.

Beginning in 2020, I developed a series of woven tapestries rendering imagery of the relationships and affairs of the women in the stories "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman" and "The Lovers of Bassorah."[9] These pieces are presented as a series of diptychs and triptychs focusing on the moments of sincere care, vulnerability, and passion between the women and their time together before it is inevitably undone by the end of the tale. Specifically, by focusing on moments of passion, I wanted to give their relationships emphasis through visual rendering as a way to manifest them into reality to inspire the viewer to build a world, personify the characters, and find points of relatability as illustrations do within storybooks. Their moments of intimacy can be more powerful and lasting than the demise or misfortune with which their desire is punished. As the maker, it feels like doing justice to their love.

My fascination with "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman" started with a few lines in Sahar Amer's *Crossing Borders* (2008) and her analysis of the tale, which does not shy away from erotic descriptions of Budur and Hayat al-Nufus in their extraordinary marriage and their physical and emotional tenderness.[10] There are other documented instances of lesbianism in medieval SWANA/Islamic society. As Amer addresses in her book, medieval medical theorists proposed hypotheses on the source of lesbianism, medicalizing it as a condition caused in infancy by a mix of various plants eaten by the mother.[11] Others theorized that which causes lesbians to act upon their sexual desires is a vapor in their labia, which needs to be extinguished.[12] Although these records might seem absurd today, they are crucial in making visible the history of lesbianism. That said, they are also written as observational speculation from a man's perspective, and lack the emotion and passion that stories, fictional or not, hold within them.

I acknowledge that the relationships I speak of in *Alf Layla wa Layla* do not end well. However, the flash affair between the noblewoman and the slave in "The Lovers of Bassorah," and the relationship between Budur and Hayat al-Nufus before the return of Kamar al-Zaman give these women and their feelings a presence that the comparative coldness of the medical hypotheses lack. Even if they are not real people or real relationships, they relate and manifest a familiar love and desire that remains a truth for anyone who feels love or passion for another.

The earliest artwork in the Behind Closed Doors series, *Two Lovers*, highlights the intimacy between Budur and Hayat al-Nufus [Figure 6.2]. I made this by appropriating the style and composition of the sixteenth-century Safavid manuscript painting known as *A Prince and Princess Embrace* (*c*.1550), but then swapping out the male figure's head in the original for a woman's and adding a beard in the hand of the figure representing Hayat al-Nufus.[13] In a process of accumulating parts, similar to that of the compilation of *Alf Layla wa Layla*, each piece is first made digitally through Photoshopping several images sourced from various medieval manuscripts from the various lands and eras of Islamic-ruled empires.

Figure 6.2: Yasmine K. Kasem, *Two Lovers* (from the series Behind Closed Doors), 2021. Cotton, natural and synthetic dyes, 5 × 3.5 inches. Courtesy of Yasmine K. Kasem.

Many of the central figures are initially men. I cause them to become women through swapped heads; I often have to cut a feminine face from a different image. The backgrounds are then formed from amalgamations of other images to create new settings for the characters and their relationships to reside. Collage became the only real possibility through which to

approach image making in this process, primarily to create something new out of something old. The palimpsest of collage has always struck me as a medium suitable to express the feeling of liminality and hybridity: the deconstruction of an original image, alteration and re-composition is a rewriting and decontextualizing of the history and message of the original work. The use of these old images creates a link back to the queerness in history that I feel has been kept from me. I use images, some as old as the stories and characters, and their relationships to reclaim that history.

There was a moment early on in this series that initiated a slight hesitation. The bold visibility of the first few pieces intimidated me. Not just as an artist dabbling with complex imagery for the first time, but also as a newly-out queer person learning to navigate SWANA and Islamic communities, openly embracing my queerness. The tapestries proudly displayed the intimacy and desire between Budur and Hayat al-Nufus that I intended to render, but surveillance and its potential consequences nearly intimidated me into never officially showing the piece. This was so much the case that, in making a smaller test piece for the next tapestry, I added copious amounts of salt and salt water into the weaving during and after the felting process. Larger crystals clung to the cotton and resisted dissolving in the water, adding a rough texture. As it dried, flat, sprawling crystals began to form, glossing over the image, eventually turning opaque and obscuring parts of the picture and interrupting the visual narrative. The salt muted the visibility of the relationship rendered in the tapestry like a form of iconoclasm. It was a relief and comfort in comparison to the boldness of the embrace in *Two Lovers*, which had little deniability of same sex attraction. Ultimately, I wanted *Two Lovers* to be seen on the walls of galleries and museums, but there was also a tinge of anxiety, acknowledging that the undeniable queerness in the imagery would reflect on me and that afterwards, I could in no way deny or hide my queerness in my professional career. The display of *Two Lovers* could threaten potential connections and exhibitions in various places in SWANA, especially Egypt, which has been moving in an increasingly homophobic direction both legislatively and socially. Yet, regardless of my anxieties early on, Behind Closed Doors has been presented to the public since its creation and will remain visible, as was intended.

Viewing my practice as a way to tell stories, I include myself in the audience. This series is how I feel about my own relationship, and it allows me to publicly express and celebrate the love I have for my partner and our life together. It also opens up an imaginative history for that love and identity to reside within as something with roots deeply embedded, nourishing the present and inshallah, the future.

Healing

Tragedy seems to be a requirement for lesbians in romance narratives. Many stories featuring same sex relationships share similar narrative progressions to those in *Alf Layla wa Layla*: two people meet, form a bond, and act on an attraction, which is then interrupted by heteronormativity and its consequences, especially homophobia. Anyone who has seen lesbian films can attest to this pattern. Although romance and eroticism are strong motivations in narratives, it is equally as important to address healing. It is not lost on me that much of this essay is written against a backdrop of pain, grief, anxiety, and crisis in the wake of mounting pressure from the layers of my own identity. Much of my work has manifested as a form of catharsis from that pain. When imagining the process of healing after trauma, I envision the passage of time. But what does it look like as an artwork? How can I describe it? It is an arduous, ongoing, and time-consuming practice in an active state. Furthermore, what does healing look like for me? Unlike the woman in “The Lovers of Bassorah,” the vicissitudes of fortune have not brought me the heartache that would result from separation from my lover. Rather, like Shahryar, my internal imposter syndrome threatens the thoughts of acceptance and confidence that evade the tearing forces that trouble my identity. There are wounds that still need to scab over and crust away.

My vicissitudes of fortune are comparable to the dynamic of the madness, rage, and pain of Shahryar and the bravery and patience of Shahrazad [Figure 6.3]. There are threats I meet with my art and its narrative, yet I must also work to soften my own heart through healing. The practice of creating and conjuring these tapestries channels Shahrazad, distracting my imposter syndrome in order to validate my identity. Acting as both Shahryar and Shahrazad, entertaining myself with these stories of queer femme love in this literary antique, I am falling in love with my own identity because I see myself and my relationship reflected in these stories.

Figure 6.3: Yasmine K. Kasem, *The 210th Night* (second edition, from the series Behind Closed Doors), 2021. Cotton, natural and synthetic dyes, 5 × 3.5 inches. Courtesy of Yasmine K. Kasem.

My art practice functions similarly in purpose to Shahrazad's role of self-preservation and the preservation of others. Visual storytelling through art advocates for existence and validation. Storytelling about being queer, Muslim, and Arab insists upon existence and actively broadens the narrative of SWANA culture and identity. This creates links to others who

may feel isolated in liminality. Yet, through awareness, space is created for these communities to come together. Validation and community-building are central purposes behind my art practice as I desire to contribute to lasting change by softening the hearts of those who wish ill upon queer, Muslim, and/or SWANA people.

Notes

1 Richard F. Burton, "The Lovers of Bassorah," *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. VII (n.p.: Burton Club For Private Subscribers Only, 1885), 130–33.

2 Richard F. Burton, "The Story of King Shahryar and His Brother," *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. I (n.p.: Burton Club For Private Subscribers Only, 1885), 15.

3 Ibid., 24.

4 Mary Nardini Gang, *Towards the Queerest Insurrection*, part 1 (Milwaukee: self published, 2014); reprinted on *The Anarchist Library*, accessed August 5, 2021, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/mary-nardini-gang-toward-the-queerest-insurrection.

5 David Ghanim, *The Sexual World of the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 129.

6 Ibid., 169.

7 Richard F. Burton, "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman", in *A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*, vol. III (n.p.: Burton Club For Private Subscribers Only, 1885), 287–89.

8 Ibid., 289.

9 Burton, "The Lovers of Bassorah," 130–33.

10 Sahar Amer, *Crossing Borders: Love Between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 77–87.

11 The theorists in question are Yuhanna ibn Masawayh (ninth-century physician) and Al-Kindi (ninth-century philosopher).

12 Sahar Amer, "Medieval Arab Lesbians and Lesbian-Like Women," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18.2 (2009): 216.

13 *A Prince and Princess Embrace*, *c*.1550, Safavid Iran, ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 42.3 × 30.6 cm, Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, S1986.295, accessed August 11, 2021, https://asia.si.edu/object/S1986.295/#object-content.

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Chapter 7

I Only Read About Myself on Bathroom Walls and “On Behalf Of: I Am an Ottoman but in Name Only”

Qais Assali

The photographic series I Only Read About Myself on Bathroom Walls documents queer time and dialogues and proposes bathroom walls as meeting spaces between bodies and temporalities. Part autoethnography, part autobiography, and part visual historiography, these images tell stories of a queer Palestinian diasporic experience and its parlance with wider cultural, political, and social meanings and understandings.

Figure 7.1: Qais Assali, *IMG_4696 CROP, 2015-05-29 07:13:55*, 2015. iPhone 5c digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

Figure 7.2: Qais Assali, *IMG_4678 CROP, 2015-05-29 07:10:33*, 2015. iPhone 5c digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

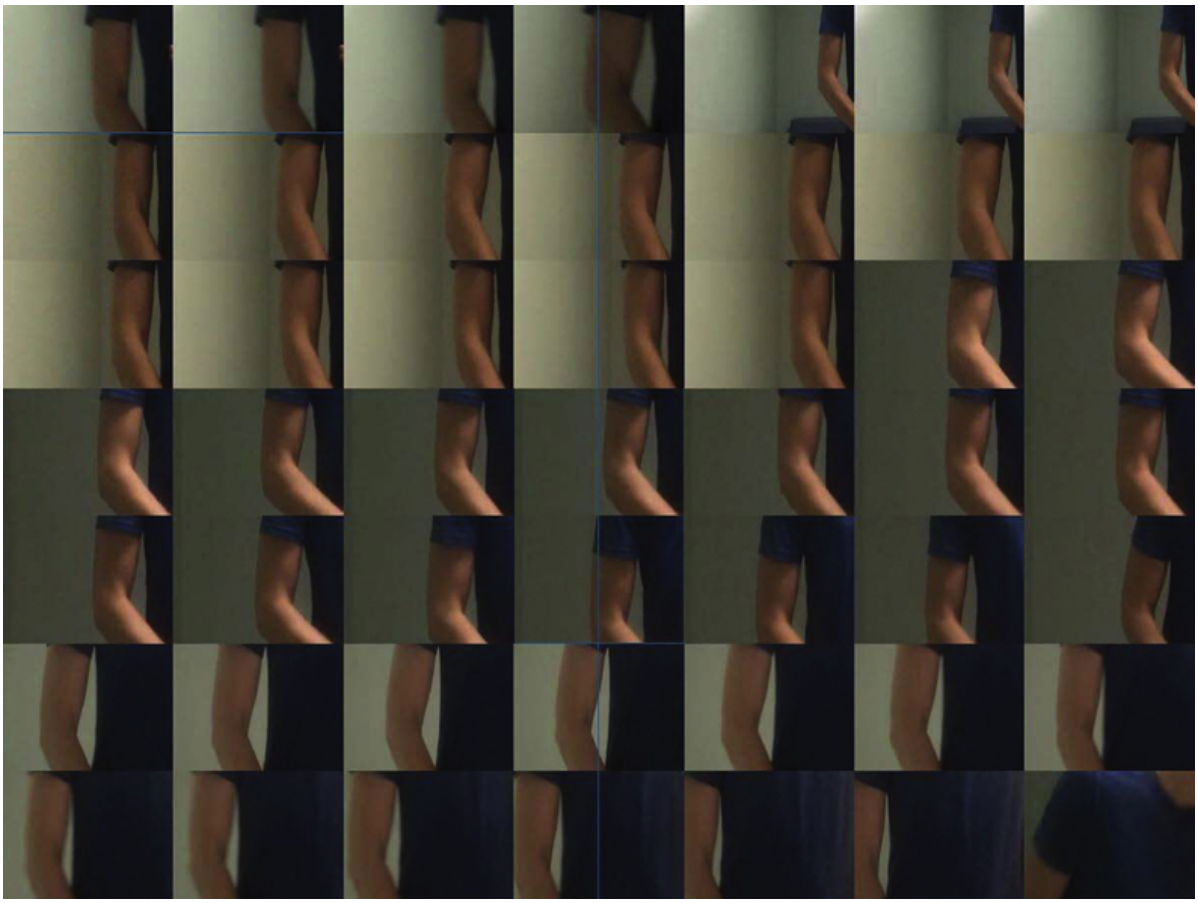

Figure 7.3: Qais Assali, untitled photographic sequence, 2021. iPhone 7 digital photographic sequence. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

Figure 7.4: Qais Assali, *IMG_4703 CROP, 2015-05-29 07:14:05*, 2015. iPhone 5c digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

Figure 7.5: Qais Assali, *IMG_4677 CROP, 2015-05-29 07:10:22*, 2015. iPhone 5c digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

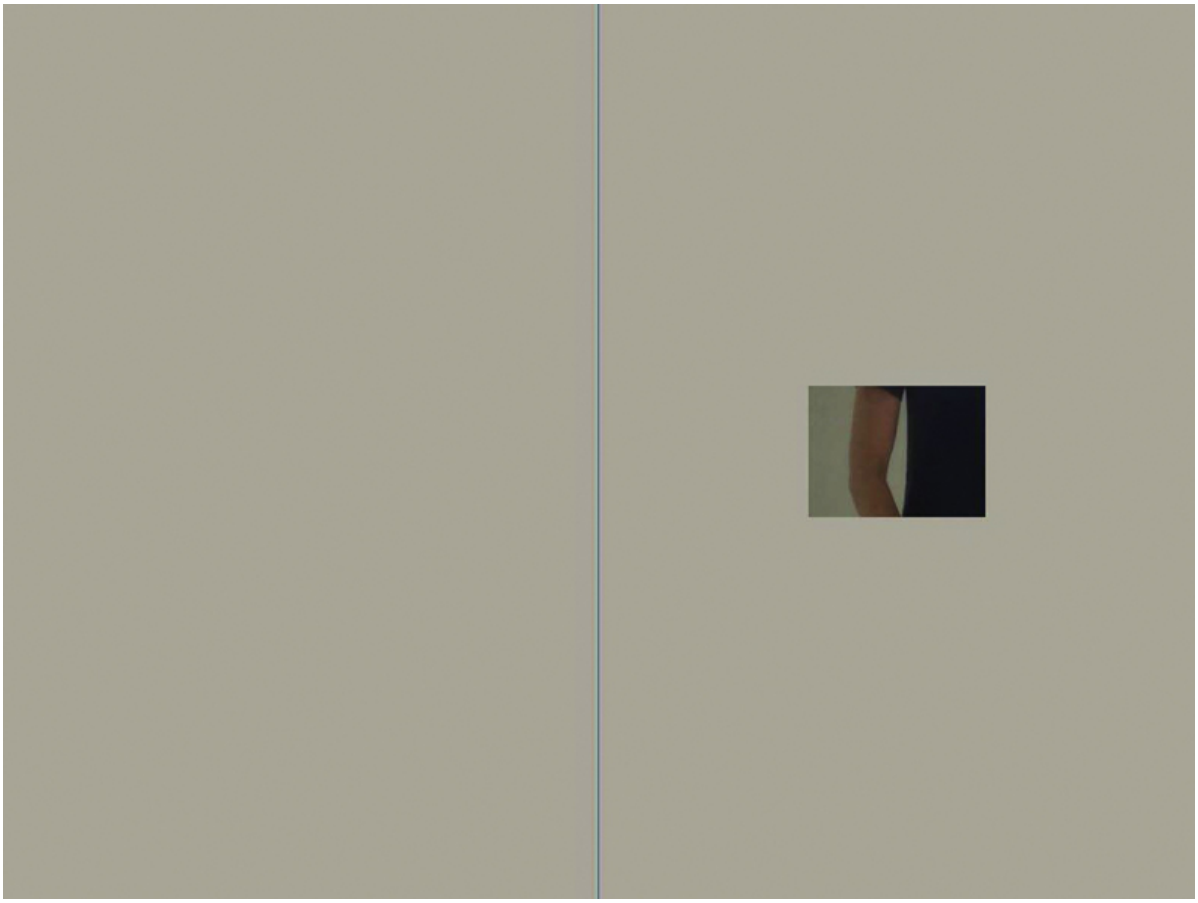

Figure 7.6: Qais Assali, *VIDEO STILL, 2019-07-2 10:55:48*, 2019. iPhone 7 digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

Figure 7.7: Qais Assali, *IMG_4683 CROP, 2015-05-29 07:10:48*, 2015. iPhone 5c digital photograph. Courtesy of Qais Assali.

I dreamed of Oscar Wilde's house

Near the door, the neighbor's door is open

Within, a kiss exchanged, a dream's sweet tape

In Brazil's grasp, a testicle's tale unfolds

Obsessed pursuit, where the tumor holds

Found, yet unreturned, the body's silent plea

Essence of spirit, testimony, and regret.[1]

In the time of COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, I found myself desiring to be more personal, as I have never done in my practice. As a Palestinian in my closet, I went out and loud within the walls of my shelter-in-place. I found myself more interested than ever in talking not only about my sexuality but also in responding to homophobic acts back home in Nablus and to how homophobia, here and there, affects me as a diasporic queer body.

Through temporal dissonance, fluidity, and corporeal resonance in reading the diaries of Palestinian teacher, poet, and Arab nationalist Khalil Afandi al-Sakakini (1878–1953) and his student Ihsan Hasan al-Turjman (1893–1917), a private in the Ottoman Army, I become these men. I (our aesthete) see their bodies in the diaries as an embodied battleground; out of place and time.

"Lastu 'uthmaniyyan 'illa bil-'ism" ("I am an Ottoman but in name only"). This idealist sentiment from Turjman's diaries reflects the influence of Sakakini's teachings on identity and the nuanced dynamics of Ottoman affiliation.[2] Turjman, a soldier for the Ottomans during World War I (1914–18), is my comrade in the Ottoman embrace. One who in the mystic folds of war's tumult spent languid hours "toying with his mustache," an arabesque dance beneath the shadow's veil. Within the pages of his 1915 diaries he unfurls a revelation: "qissati ma'a ad-da' il-'ifranjiyy – lamm amass basharan" ("my tale with the Frankish disease – I did not touch a human being"), a verse echoing through the bazaars of shared queer narratives and bodies politicized by Allah. Turjman and I, weaving cocky tales of enigmatic swells beneath our garments, our diaries a poetic mélange of Oriental whispers, both mention similar stories around suspicious enlargement of our testicles.[3] His writings, a dance of queer serenades, reveal a devotion to bodily care, a hypnotic waltz with sincere hymns to well-being interwoven with fear of the "Frankish malady." "In this lyrical tapestry, his vigilance is a dance with shadows and the specter of encounters with British paramours, where whispers of syphilis float in the air like the fragrant notes of ancient winds."[4]

Once, in Ramallah, while entering the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, I heard gossip about homoeroticism in Sakakini's letters to his *shaqiq ruhi* ("soulmate") Dawoud ("David"), who died during Sakakini's one-year trip to Brooklyn, NY. Sakakini (fortunately) returned to Palestine due to an economic depression.[5] For Sakakini, I advocate for a pedagogy of "outing." What does it mean to out a dead body? Am I so desperate, Khalil al-Sakakini, to take out your dead body, to drag you out of the closet or the grave? I, too, lost a lover, a Lebanese *shaqiq ruhi* who died while in the distance of occupation and colonial borders. By outing us, I archive a genealogy of brown homosexual bodies.

Am I duplicating the horror of outing oneself? My reader reads this diasporic queer body as excessive, some body parts are not returned; with characters not so decided, the reader brings up ideas around identification and subjectivity. I am searching for a writing form—which is exciting—a queer, non-confirmed and non-conformed form; a mid-30s cocky aesthete, building a loose, fragmented, non-linear structure indexing ancestral information, playing and performing knowledge, as a bard; storyteller; a queer genealogist desiring invocation; homosexual channeling the dead, unearthing "queer roots for the diaspora."[6]

Imparted from Bibles, Qur'an, rumors, social dynamics, and traditions, we see how homosexuality is communicated. This cocky aesthete is trying to play with contemporary religious understandings of homophobia, and Ottoman injunctions forbidding homosexuality in Palestine and under British colonialism. Processed in this form of wanting to understand writing's extreme uses, but also pre and post COVID-19; with one of the worst genocides in modern history against Palestinians, this writing processed; outed to the reader. My 2020 performative video *Dawoud, Ya Yonathani* ("David, my Jonathan") refers to Sakakini's love and lament for Dawoud, to whom he writes in his diaries.[7]

Stimulating radical empathy and a desire to transcend queer genealogy and temporality to read Sakakini's lamentations for Dawoud, I queer my own relation to contemporary "out and proud," neoliberal, western notions of queerness based on biblical homophobia or "the homosexual inclinations of his creator,"[8] and instead "identify" with an archaic kind of queer pain and a rage I find in historical Arab figures, and that is under examination through imaging technologies. Sakakini writes,

> Last night, I dreamt of Dawoud. I was with him in Jerusalem, and he was filled with power and life, and his face shone with his radiant smiles. So we passed by the American store, but we did not enter. Then we passed by Al-Tarzi store, and they were smiling at us. […] Then I saw myself bouncing on the roofs of houses until I came to the roof of our house and went down completely naked.[9]

The "romantic cocky aesthete" asks: how to bear the weight of the dead body? How to identify with romanticism without romanticizing trauma? Once again: how to bear the weight of the gay dead body? How to identify with romanticism without romanticizing a queer trauma? And, how to read life after the life? For this, the cocky aesthete uses the Allah/God aesthetics of "good people go to heaven when they die" and "hal al-'alaqa bayna dawud wa yunatan kanat 'alaqatun shirira" ("was the relationship between David and Jonathan evil?").[10] How does one read this literature in your eyes?

My work *Dawoud, Ya Yonathani* is a pantomime of a queer Palestinian diaspora; or a mimicry act based on the funereal letter from Sakakini to his lover, an embodiment of the past through taking over the voice as part of the meaning. Antagonism, relational aesthetics, and geopolitics delve into sociopolitical and autobiographical questions and experiences. A queer method that goes beyond sexuality; distorting perspectives and disrupting patterns. A sense of queerness based on notions of deviation, deviant identity-politics, and politics of subversion, ideologicality, materiality, and historicality. Sakakini writes in his diaries,

> O Dawoud, O Yonathani, O my love, O soulmate, O my life, O all my hopes, O all my pleasure, O all my happiness. How did you leave me to languish? If only my days had passed and my breaths were shortened before your days were over and your breaths. I wish that I had been inserted into my shroud before you were inserted into your shroud. […] When I go back and lie beside your grave, I will water it with my tears and wipe my face with its dust and pound my chest with its stones.[11]

In 1908, a correpondant from Sultana replies to Sakakini: "Is there no good news in America, or anything interesting, to tell me about? What is this Khalil?!"[12] Late 2023, at The Fletcher School in Boston, the cocky aesthete spoke with Professor Salim Tamari about the scarcity of arts, philosophy, theaters, literature, or tennis in Palestinian cities such as Jenin, Nablus, and Tulkarm, as mentioned in the historical note draft written by Sakakini.[13] "Is Sakakini influenced by the writings of the Englishman Oscar Wilde? Did Sakakini write any theater texts or unpack theater?" our aesthete asked.[14]

On a draft piece of paper, Sakakini states: "There are many words in the Arabic language that I hate to hear or name, and if it were up to me, I would have erased them from [Arabic] language. I hate the word '*abd* ("slave") and all its variants."[15] Terms I would like to pedagogically remove from language(s) would be "sisterhood" and "brotherhood." I would do this to engender our "same-sex" relationships and bonding and to acknowledge the crisis of gendered traditions. Oscar Wilde cited the Bible in his 1895 trial for homosexuality, referencing how the Bible profiled David and Jonathan as homosexual lovers.

[16] Some Christian Arabic blogs question the nature of the relationship between Dawoud and Yonathan, probing whether it was sinful.[17] These interventions in the homoerotic aspects of David and Jonathan in the Hebrew biblical tale have a broader parallel with the politics of the Zionist occupation of greater Palestine.

On behalf of the sons of Jabal al-Nar ("The Mountain of Fire"), on behalf of everyone I represent and who authorizes me to represent them, and on behalf of every *rajul sharif hurr ul-mabadi'wal 'afkar* ("honorable man, free in principles and thought") *wa rujuliyy l-mawaqif* ("and manly in his stance"). *I*, and the cocky aesthete, accept reading scenarios for gay Arab stories, acting roles, perhaps in-closets; out; outing; outed by; hybrid "gay roles" within Arab societies.

Classic in coming-out narratives, versions of contained rage, expressed through satire, take center stage. In this narrative landscape, rage becomes a potent trope. In the delicate dance of self-discovery, Oscar Wilde's poetic proclamation "to love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance"[18] transcends boundaries of gender and orientation. My reader questions if this is gay self-care, self-love. Is this cocky aesthete being ironic or sincere? Or is this just a COVID-19 trend of self-care, an obsession with one's own body, or just a mundane "male camaraderie?" I speak as Sakakini's correspondant,

> *Khalil, what is this? Is this unnatural hatred or is it supernatural love? What is natural love and what is unnatural love? Is natural love based on instinct? Is it normal for Jonathan to love someone who takes the royal throne from him? Did Jonathan know that God/Allah gave the kingdom to David and that is why he loved him? David's presence would deprive him of the kingdom. Where did this love come from? There is only one source of love, which is "God." Is God love, or is it an elusive love, or just an anomaly or an evil relationship?*

Fertility-seeking confronts futility in a paradoxical dance, cognitive dissonance intersects with homosexuality as *hubb murawigh* ("elusive love"), echoing Festinger's 1957 theories, unraveling the psychological conflict and mental discomfort that comes with holding two conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes.[19] In our ostensibly heteronormative society, bold surfaces reveal muted bisexuality's corruption, laying bare silenced complexities within societal constructs. My reader is acknowledging their own dissonances.

Amid medical uncertainty, my queer identity is entwined with notions of classical divine retribution. In the summer of 2019, I underwent medical imaging and later the removal of an ambiguous tumor in my testicle. My queer sexuality was brought into this experience as if the tumor was a "punishment from God." My Brazilian surgeon at University of Illinois Health, Chicago, removed one of my (two) testicles, revealing a 7.3 × 7.2 × 3.9 cm seminoma tumor; a corporeal journey shapes the resonance of my identity. The Brazilian surgeon not only fragmented my testicle into small parts, obsessing over finding the tumor while invading my body (he found it), but he did not return it. Despite my arguing that it is obligatory to return part of my body based on (my peoples') spiritual beliefs, it was never returned.

I am gay in name only. I reject the bold revelation of an alleged unconventional family lineage. The term "'ajib," borrowed from classical Persian, originating from Arabic, and further traced to Punjabi, encompasses the marvelous, strange, exotic, weird, or a persona that challenges societal norms, including unconventional expressions. Although I do not identify as *'ajib*, I grapple with a dissonance disorder. At times, I make an effort to find arousal by "The Man."

I violently aestheticize outing other homosexual men: the teacher and his student, the dead, myself. Doubting a homosexual existence, I out the reader. I out both of our denied psychological cognitive dissonances (muted bisexuality passing /believing as straight/homosexual), in the form of a romantic homosexual manifesto from 1897 where bisexuality is default: *ta'alu nanqarid* ("let us go extinct").

Notes

1 AI generated text, ChatGPT 3.5, October 7, 2023.

2 Salim Tamari, "The Short Life of Private Ihsan," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 30 (Spring 2007): 55, accessed January 30, 2024, https://www.palestine-studies.org/sites/default/files/jq-articles/30_tamari_1_0.pdf

3 Ihsan Turjman, "Ihsan Turjman's diaries during World War 1, 1915-16," archival diary, Institute for Palestine Studies, Ramallah, accessed January 30, 2024, https://archive.palestine-studies.org/ar/content/%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A5%D8%AD%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-it-memoirs-1915.

4 AI generated text, ChatGPT 3.5, October 7, 2023.

5 Khalil Sakakini, "Nyu Yurk, Sultana, Al-Quds, 1907–1912" ("New York, Sultana, Jerusalem, 1907–1912"), in *Yawmiyyat Khalil al-Sakakini* ("Diaries of Khalil Sakakini"), vol. 1, ed. Akram Musallam (Ramallah: Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre and The Institute of Jerusalem Studies, 2003), 40.

6 Jarrod Hayes, *Queer Roots for the Diaspora* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

7 Qais Assali, *Dawoud, Ya Yonathani*, 6 minute performative video, Palestinian Museum, Birzeit, 2020, accessed January 30, 2024, https://www.qaisassali.com/dawoud-ya-yonathai.

8 Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1977), 239.

9 Sakakini, "Nyu Yurk, Sultana, Al-Quds, 1907–1912," 107.

10 "Was the relationship between David and Jonathan evil? 1 Sam 18, 1 Sam 20, and 2 Sam 1," Dr. Ghaly (blog), accessed January 22, 2024, https://www.drghaly.com/articles/display/10819.

11 Sakakini, "Nyu Yurk, Sultana, Al-Quds, 1907–1912," 40.

12 Ibid., 96.

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Chapter 8

Out on Display: A Queer Negotiation of Identity and Anonymity in Diaspora

Dylan Volk

There you will see and be seen.
There you will not be alone.
There you will celebrate your beauty, sexuality and dancing skills.
There your body, clothes and look will be important.
There you can photograph and be photographed.
There you will be aware of when, where and how others look at you.
There you will be aware of when, where and how you look at others.
There you will attract more attention to yourself.
There you will not attract more attention to yourself.
There you will feel at home.
There you will have more fun than what you would have at home.
There you can get displaced.

—Mahmoud Khaled, "Statements," from the installation *As If You Weren't in Your Own Home* (2018).[1]

Then should I not, *precisely because of my love*, hide from the other how much I love him? […] Yet to hide passion totally (or even to hide, more simply, its excess) is inconceivable: not because the human subject is too weak, but because passion is in essence made to be seen: the hiding must be seen: *I want you to know that I am hiding something from you*, that is the active paradox I must resolve: *at one and the same time* it must be known and not known …

—Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* (1977).[2]

Situated between Istanbul's Taksim Square and the busy waterfront district of Kabataş, Cihangir is a hilltop neighborhood that has historically been home to a cosmopolitan community of craftspeople, creatives, academics, and expatriates. Today, it is regarded as something of a bohemian enclave in Turkey. ARK Kültür was one of six participating venues in the neighborhood to host the international artists and travelers who gathered for the *Fifteenth Istanbul Biennial* exhibition, September 16–November 12, 2017. Like many of the neighboring structures, ARK Kültür was originally a family home. Following a renovation in 2008, the modernist villa retained many of its residential markers: a small balcony on each of the two uppermost floors; a row of street-facing windows with the curtains drawn; and green vines that wrap around its metal gate. But in 2017, its whitewashed façade and curved contours unmistakably stood out among the cubic apartments that line the narrow streets of Cihangir. Less conspicuous was the small square plaque that for a few months identified the building as "The Unknown Crying Man Museum" [Figure 8.1].

Figure 8.1: Mahmoud Khaled, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, (detail: view of the exterior, ARK Kültür, Istanbul), 2017. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of Mahmoud Khaled.

In the inaugural installation of his *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man* (2017), Egyptian artist Mahmoud Khaled (b. 1982) transforms the entire space of ARK Kültür into a site for restaging and remembering the life of its eponymous figure. The Crying Man, visitors come to learn, is himself an artist who fled to Cihangir from Cairo after his arrest in May 2001, when officers of the Cairo Vice Squad and State Security Investigations swept a floating gay discotheque on the Nile known as the Queen Boat. Khaled's *House Museum* takes this historical event, which would come to mark one of the most highly publicized crackdowns on same-sex practices in an Arab country, as its source material. As visitors move through the museum, they encounter objects and images that narrate the Queen Boat incident differently than it has hitherto been reported in news outlets. It is not simply an international *cause célèbre* or human rights violation, but a personal history, albeit a highly fictionalized one. In Cihangir, the Crying Man reads American author Truman Capote (1924–84), keeps his blinds pulled shut, and leaves sleeping pills on his bedside table. It is through these details that Khaled pieces together fragments of an imagined gay Arab life outside of Cairo, although not necessarily out of the proverbial closet. Khaled mobilizes the distinctive genre of the house museum to interrogate the very terms on which the categories of in and out are established.

In this chapter, I tour Khaled's *House Museum* to ask how these discursive categories change across geopolitical borders, and to consider how a queer diasporic subjectivity functions at multiple levels: one interpersonal, intimate, and affective, and the other public and politicized. The institutional genre of the house museum makes these conceptual oppositions especially clear, precisely because the house museum promises visitors a uniquely familiar experience of a private life, and, at the same time, must be able to situate this personal history within a larger social or historical context that is intelligible and relevant to the general public. Khaled's *House Museum* troubles these expectations by staging the interior life of a figure who, although once at the center of a media storm, remains ostensibly anonymous. The Unknown Crying Man Museum has all the trappings of a standard heritage site, including an audio tour and a gift shop. And yet, while visitors can

peruse its former resident's library and idle in his bedroom, they will never learn his name or see his face. Khaled exposes a structural tension between what is known and unknown, or what is seen and unseen, which is at play in the Queen Boat story, in the institutional genre of the house museum, and in the very making of a gay diasporic subjectivity. This chapter further triangulates these subjects to ask how identity is negotiated both inside and outside the bounds of the closet, the home, the community, and the nation state.

Scholars of both queer studies and postcolonial theory have rigorously examined the largely Euro-American metaphors of the closet and coming out that emerge in the discursive field of sexuality in the twentieth century, providing a robust framework for understanding Khaled's work. Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett, a narrative psychologist whose research centers gay- and lesbian-identified Arab Muslims, makes an especially compelling intervention, suggesting that a strategy of "coming in" or "letting in" can provide a productive alternative to the homo-normalizing narrative of "coming out," which may not serve the postcolonial or diasporic subject.[3] Hammoud-Beckett describes this as a deliberate, strategic decision about when and for whom one chooses to open the door to one's "club of life."[4] Art historian Andrew Gayed has further employed Hammoud-Beckett's notion of "coming in" to describe the process of a gay subject formation in the Arab diaspora, and to articulate a queer diasporic aesthetic. As Gayed writes, in the late nineteenth century and under the aegis of colonialism, the Arabic term *jinsiyya* (lit. "citizenship"; "nationality") came to mean "sexuality" in addition to its earlier meanings.[5] This conflation of sexual and national identity signals the emergence of a postcolonial and homonational discourse wherein one's national recognition and inclusion depends upon the ability to perform as an "appropriately" sexed and sexual subject. Jasbir Puar's theory of homonationalism similarly describes how the regulatory scripts of citizen status and sexual status mutually reinforce one another, inscribing certain gay national subjects while making others altogether invisible, or even impossible.[6]

This negotiation between sexual and national identity is further complicated for gay-identified Arabs living in the diaspora, for whom it may be unclear exactly which social or geopolitical context sets the terms of appropriateness or delimits these borders between "in" and "out." Gayed's reconsideration of Hammoud-Beckett's narrative strategy proves particularly applicable to Khaled's work, in part because of the artist's own subject position as a gay Egyptian man living in the diaspora, and principally because his *Proposal for a House Museum for an Unknown Crying Man* follows the fictionalized life story of another gay-identified Egyptian man living outside of Egypt. Finally, the notion of "coming in" seems most germane to this work because the house museum as an apparatus and institution trades on the process of inviting the public into a private or domestic space and an intimate restaging of an interior life. Eve Sedgwick writes in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008) that "the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being peculiarly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally."[7] With this in mind, what do the relations of Khaled's *House Museum* explain about identity in the shadow of the Queen Boat raid?[8] What is the epistemology of the house museum, both as a genre and as an institutional form, and what can it reveal about a queer diasporic subjectivity?

A Photograph and a "Postcolonial Predicament"

Khaled characterizes his own memory of the Queen Boat incident as one heavily mediated through the popular press and an international human rights discourse. In an interview with *Aperture* magazine in 2019, he explains:

> I remember waking up one day in the morning and reading about the raid in all the newspapers […] I saw the images of the fifty-two men all over the place that day. I think this memory is very iconic for my generation. The incident was more reduced to a very abstract image for me; then the Human Rights Watch report was released afterwards with all the details of torture and investigation—all these horrific details made *that reduced image* very politically and emotionally charged.[9]

The "reduced image" Khaled refers to is a single photograph that circulated widely in print and online in the months following the arrest, detention, and eventual trial of fifty-two men charged with *fujur* ("habitual debauchery") in the spring of 2001. The photograph would later serve as the visual point of departure for the artist's museum installation in Cihangir. Pictured outside the Cairo state security court, two of the accused cover their faces with wads of white cloth in an attempt to conceal their identities; one man appears to weep into the fabric. It is this man's figure that visitors to The Unknown Crying Man Museum find referenced throughout the site. His bronze bust appears outside the main entryway. At the end of a narrow hall stands an ornately carved wooden mirror, its surface partially covered over by his photographic image. A simple stylized drawing of his silhouette is stamped on paper cups, a stack of which sit atop a watercooler in the museum's modest giftshop. According to Khaled, this single photograph appeared frequently in the foreign media's coverage of the Queen Boat arrests, becoming "like a stock image for the political situation of the gay scene in Cairo."[10] It appeared often in British and American news publications like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. Khaled noted that "Whenever they wanted to write a story about the gay scene in Egypt they would use this image."[11]

Khaled's reference to an unspecified "they" writing about Egypt signifies a discursive divide between us and them, "the gay scene" and the mainstream media, Egypt and elsewhere, which might otherwise be understood in terms of inside and outside. It is this division that undergirds what media scholar Julian Awwad describes as the "postcolonial predicament" posed by the Queen Boat raid and reenacted in the response from numerous international actors in the aftermath.[12] Unsurprisingly, the popular press in both Egypt and abroad was quick to comment on the Queen Boat case, often in the form of totalizing statements about general attitudes toward same-sex practices in Arab and Islamic countries. Major human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also weighed in, alleging that "gays in Egypt suffer discrimination, persecution, and violence because their actual or perceived sexual orientation is deemed to threaten socially accepted norms […] Egyptians [have] been tortured simply for *who they are*."[13] This statement suggests that the men arrested on the boat and in the surrounding district faced legal prosecution on the basis of their identity as gay men. But, postcolonial scholars like Awwad and Joseph Massad question the legitimacy of any such identity category outside of a Euro-American context. Awwad argues that Egypt's postcolonial position created the cultural conditions necessary to conceive of the gay man as a social and legal subject who can be persecuted by the state or protected by an international agent. He specifies that "how to conceive the plight of homosexuals *after the state is prompted to will them to exist* is the question that the postcolonial predicament raises."[14] It is therefore fitting that Khaled's museum only imagines its protagonist's life after his arrest and subsequent exile from Egypt.

Khaled's *House Museum* cannot be said to resolve this "postcolonial predicament," but it does expose several of its structuring epistemological binaries. Notions of inside and outside, private and public, and seen and unseen function to establish who constitutes an appropriate gay subject. As Khaled's work makes clear, the borders between these discursive categories are wont to change according to one's context and company. At The Unknown Crying Man Museum, visitors encounter images and objects whose meaning shifts along the lines of national or regional borders. A black leather jacket, for example, hangs in the hallway outside the bedroom. The garment, being typical of both gay leathermen and the

Egyptian *mukhabbarat* (military intelligence; intelligence agency), is at once erotic and unnerving. As with this jacket, Khaled's visual references to Egypt are polysemous, and often oblique to an uninitiated audience. Scattered throughout the museum in cabinets and on tabletops are photographs of Cairo city parks, but the images contain few if any distinguishing landmarks. Instead, they capture the mundane environmental details of cruising spots: the edge of a bench or the texture of the brushwood. That these spaces may be recognizable to only a select viewership that holds privileged knowledge of Cairo and its sexual underground does not preclude other viewers from discerning that some specific meaning exists, even as it might remain inaccessible to them. The viewer who both recognizes their own lack of knowledge and insists that there is something more to know has stumbled upon what D. A. Miller and Sedgwick describe as the "open secret" of the closet.[15] Khaled's *House Museum* mobilizes the form of the open secret to negotiate both a gay and a postcolonial subjectivity, and to imagine that fraught subjectivity on display for an international audience.

"Displaced" Nostalgia

One function of the house museum is to reveal what was otherwise private about a life. Scholars in museum studies and museology have turned to social theories of domesticity, dwelling, kinship, and the everyday to further explain the house museum and its peculiar expressions of history. Yet, the house museum as an institutional genre depends on the colonial logic of heritage preservation, which gestures to unsettled borders between the personal and the political, or the local and the global. Museum studies scholar Linda Young traces the history of "the pervasive musealization of houses" alongside the emergence of twentieth-century heritage movements in Europe, underscoring the important function of these sites; like almost all other museum categories, house museums are shapers and signifiers of national identity in a global visual economy.[16] Whereas the encyclopedic or national museum inscribes an era or a civilization, the house museum legitimizes an individual or family, and in doing so authorizes a particular subject position.

Recent theorizations of the house museum have pointed to narrative and nostalgia as key structural elements in clearly and authentically communicating a historically specific subjectivity to the museum's visitors. Nostalgia functions within the house museum to bridge the past and the present through an affective experience of longing that posits the subject's history as the ideal alternative to a current experience of loss or lack.[17] In the house museum, nostalgia plays on a productive tension between a sense of historical loss or absence and the material presence of the artifact. In a way, these artifacts function as stage props, constructing a carefully directed image of a life once lived inside a currently unoccupied home. Many of the objects scattered throughout The Unknown Crying Man Museum imbue the space with nostalgia for the gay past, albeit one that is distinctly Euro-American. In the bedroom, rings of rainbow light are cast on the walls and floors. An open copy of Capote's novel *The Grass Harp* rests at the end of the chaise lounge. Other books by prominent gay twentieth-century British and American writers, including Edmund White, Christopher Isherwood, and Allan Hollinghurst, inhabit the space. Some objects seem to make as much reference to the cosmopolitan history of the Turkish villa as to the Queen Boat affair. The porcelain plates that dot the dining table feature the delicate image of a crying boy whose cheek is wetted by a single tear, a reproduction of the popular, mass-produced *Crying Boy* paintings by twentieth-century Italian painter Giovanni Bragolin. The museum's accompanying audio tour informs visitors that the original inhabitant of the house was an Italian art dealer who had a taste for the ornate and the eccentric. According to this inventory of objects, the queer past toward which Khaled's *House Museum* gestures is not necessarily one that belongs exclusively or even primarily to its protagonist.

Gayatri Gopinath argues that "the materiality of the everyday" is an especially potent site of nostalgia for the queer diasporic subject who is displaced both temporally and physically from a sense of belonging.[18] For Gopinath, the aesthetic practices of collecting and archiving, especially at the level of the personal and individual, stage a dialogic encounter with the irrecoverable and irreconcilable past. Gopinath concludes that "it is through a narrative of the self in relation to an opaque past, a stubborn present, and an uncertain future that one confronts the limits and gaps of the material archive."[19] The photographs, curios, and everyday items on display in Khaled's *House Museum* raise more questions than they answer. They do not cohere into a tidy portrait of the Crying Man or a definitive appraisal of the postcolonial predicament posed by the Queen Boat incident. But, if the role of nostalgia in the house museum "is *not* about retrieving a past truth, [but rather] is about reconstructing the past's present, shifting legacies 'in anticipation of the future,'" what and where is the future that Khaled's *House Museum* anticipates?[20] According to the artist, The Unknown Crying Man Museum can exist "in any city in the world *except* Cairo," since nearly all fifty-two men accused in the Queen Boat trials left the area once they were able. [21] In this way, *House Museum* might be said to equate being out with being outside of Cairo. Alternatively, the museum exposes the discursive formations of the closet and coming out as ones that are not necessarily endemic to Egypt. In either case, the stipulation affirms that the *House Museum* enacts a queer negotiation of identity that is always already in diaspora.

The Intimate Act of Curation

Like nostalgia, intimacy is consequential to communicating and complicating the discursive formations of coming out and coming in at play in Khaled's *House Museum*. For visitors, intimacy informs what is known and what is knowable about the house museum's subject. Across all three floors of the ARK Kültür house, visitors are cued by everyday objects and their arrangements to the idea that the knowledge offered here is privileged and personal. Scatterings of memorabilia—a small stack of books on a desk, a clutter of photographs on the bedside table, an albuterol inhaler on the dining room buffet—stitch together a biography of this anonymized figure. This careful curation of "the materiality of the everyday" grants visitors an informational and affective access to the Crying Man's life-story and substantiates an air of intimacy that is axiomatic to the category of the house museum. How, then, does the intimacy of a house museum instruct what is (or can be) authentically known about its subject? In other words, how can the intimate and aesthetic practice of curation establish an "open secret" with which visitors can engage?

Sedgwick expounds D. A. Miller's analysis of the "open secret" of homosexuality and Michel Foucault's theory of the relation of power to knowledge to describe how the discursive force of the closet depends upon a cultural logic of knowledge as a perpetual danger.[22] Sedgwick argues that this structural logic poses a disastrous double-bind: should one remain in the closet, there always exists the danger of being found out, and subsequently accused of dishonesty in addition to sexual deviance.[23] The decision to come out comes with the risk of exposing oneself to oppression and stigmatization, as well as accusations of flagrancy (or *fujur*, in the case of the Queen Boat raid). When it comes to the so-called truth of one's own sexuality, "disclosure [is] at once compulsory and forbidden."[24] The sexual subject who discloses too much, either too soon or to the wrong parties, is considered flagrant or lewd, but the subject who does not disclose, either enough or at all, runs the risk of being deemed secretive. Sedgwick notes these duplicitous characteristics are always ascribed to the homosexual subject a priori.[25] Thus, the ostensible truth about one's sexual identity is a threat and a treasure. Miller encapsulates this tension by locating the production of selfhood in the constant negotiation between secret-keeping and

truth-telling: “I can’t quite tell my secret, because then it would be known that there was nothing really special to hide, and no one really special to hide it. But I can’t quite keep it either, because then it would not be believed that there was something to hide and someone to hide it.”[26]

In The Unknown Crying Man Museum, notions of subjectivity, intimacy, and authenticity are further complicated by the strategic supply and suppression of knowledge, in a careful negotiation between what is confessed and what is kept secret. Nowhere is this made more explicit than in the museum’s gift shop, where fifty-two identical white T-shirts, one for each of the men arrested during the Queen Boat raid, hang on a rack [Figure 8.2]. The shirts are printed with two simple lines of black text: “I want you to know that I am hiding something from you.”

Figure 8.2: Mahmoud Khaled, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, (detail, view of the gift shop, ARK Kültür, Istanbul), 2017. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of Mahmoud Khaled.

The phrase is taken is from the pages of Roland Barthes’s *A Lovers’ Discourse* (1977), a book that, like many others placed in the museum, occupies a privileged position in the queer canon of Euro-American literature.[27] First published in French and addressed to an unnamed “him,” *A Lover’s Discourse* is sometimes taken as corroboration of Barthes’s own homosexuality, although Barthes himself never publicly affirmed any particular sexual identity. Throughout the book, Barthes plays on this tension between the secret and the confession, and between what is said and what cannot or must not be. The book narrates one man’s desperate attempts to find something both specific and original to tell his lover, ultimately to no avail. Instead, Barthes concludes that it is in fact impossible to say a single thing about love and desire that has not already been said; it is the valiant effort to do so in spite of this fact that characterizes an essential experience of love. Barthes suggests that this experience is one made up of “fragments” and “figures” that, like the objects in the Crying Man’s collection, can only offer the briefest glimpse at the most private parts of a life.[28] Even taken together, these fragments cannot tell a cohesive story and can only enact a carefully crafted discourse.

By strategically directing his audience's attention to what is unsaid or unknown, Khaled exposes the importance of secret-telling and secret-keeping to the structuring logics of (homoromantic) intimacy and of the closet, as well as of the *House Museum* itself. The material artifacts on display seem, then, like secrets themselves, revealed only to the privileged few. But the narrative that these artifacts only hint at is, per Barthes, fragmentary. The audience is left to fill in or flesh out the details about the Crying Man, his life in Cihangir, and his eventual disappearance from the neighborhood. In this sense, the *House Museum* and its accompanying audio tour are the surrounding community's attempt to understand this enigmatic figure, and to contextualize his individual story within an international discourse on homosexuality and human rights in the Arab world. Although the narrator of the audio tour speaks with an air of authority, many of her statements are speculative. Within the genre of the house museum, speculation can function to entice viewers to look closer and learn more. But for those who are closeted, speculation also poses the threat of exposure. Thus, what is revealed, and to what degree, is a careful negotiation in The Unknown Crying Man Museum. Visitors should know the Crying Man is hiding something, but what exactly he is hiding goes, like the man himself, unnamed.

Between You, Me, and the Bedpost

Intimacy functions as an essential structuring logic of the house museum, but it is not uniformly at work across the entirety of Khaled's installation. Rather, Khaled conspicuously constructs certain spaces, namely the study and the bedroom, as more intimate than others, like the dining room and foyer. This difference is more than the simple consequence of the standard division of the domestic dwelling into public and private spheres. How and why Khaled fashions the study and the bedroom into spaces of exceptional affective intimacy implies something about what kinds of information are speakable or seeable in what kinds of contexts. The question of where and when one can safely speak and about what is an issue for all minoritized subjects, but perhaps especially for the homosexual subject, whose relations of and in the bedroom are made both a secret and a topic of public speculation, gossip, and rumor.

The Crying Man's bedroom is sparsely decorated [Figure 8.3]. The room's only window is draped in heavy blue fabric, with only a small sliver of natural light peeking through the edges of the curtain. The bare wooden floors are whitewashed and weathered. Like the floors, all the walls are a cool, ashy white except for one, in a deep cerulean blue. The bed, dressed in only a sheet and a single pillow covered in shimmering blue silk, is centered against this cerulean accent wall. Presumably, the Crying Man sleeps alone. The bed's wooden headboard is framed by two side tables. On one rest an alarm clock and a stack of black and white photographs, strewn about as if someone had just thumbed through them. On the other side sits a pitcher and a glass of water, an open bottle of melatonin (an over-the-counter hormone used to aid in sleep), and a badly battered self-help book titled *Love, Sex, and Being Human*.[29] In one sense, it is through these objects—many of them small or seemingly unremarkable—that visitors hope to glean a privileged and intimately personal understanding of the Crying Man and his life experience. In another, their careful inclusion might call into question the very authenticity of the site and its story. Upon closer examination, the photographs on the bedside table appear not scattered, but staged so as to appear haphazard. The bottle of melatonin sits with its cap askew and gingerly balanced atop its rim; beside it rest two small pills. These careful compositions expose both intimacy and authenticity as cultural constructions, essential to the function of the house museum as an institutional form, and, in *Proposal for a House Museum*, to the constitution of a gay subjectivity.

Figure 8.3: Mahmoud Khaled, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man* (detail: view of the bedroom, ARK Kültür, Istanbul), 2017. Mixed media installation. Courtesy of Mahmoud Khaled.

The very project of queer studies is deeply invested in unveiling the social and historical construction of gay identity, the relationship between social construction theory and gay activism, particularly in the United States, is longstanding. The effect of social construction theory on the study of gender and sexuality has largely upended essentialist notions of identity as a natural property, calling the scientific status of sexuality into question.[30] The chief advantage of social construction theory is that it encourages questioning as a methodological and political imperative. Often, constructionist approaches necessitate a degree of ambiguity or ambivalence in the answers they provide. This ambiguity is at the crux of queer theory and gay liberation movements, both of which have embraced illegibility and unintelligibility as powerful tools. Literary scholar Nicholas de Villiers fittingly suggests that the explicit appropriation and manipulation of discursive formations typically linked to intimacy, authenticity, and truth-telling—namely the interview, the autobiography, the diary, and the documentary—can be considered a queer critique of essentialism.[31] De Villiers posits the closet as a queer strategy of opacity, rather than a repressive mechanism that spawns invisibility, silence, or erasure.[32] Like the other discursive formations mentioned here, the genre of the house museum similarly trades in information and identity, making it a rather rich site for Khaled's queer critique. But, what do intimacy and authenticity mean to a man living in exile and anonymity? If the very category of the house museum relies upon the ability of the institution to grant public access to the private and personal life of an individual, then Khaled's work seems to complicate the cultural form of the house museum altogether.

Like de Villiers, Khaled takes up opacity, ambiguity, and especially anonymity as queer strategies for rebuffing the regulatory force of identity and identification. These strategies are perhaps poignantly appropriate for addressing the events of the 2001 Queen Boat incident. As Khaled and others recount, the Queen Boat trial proceedings unfolded in the limelight of the international media, with the identities and images of the defendants widely publicized. According to the report issued by Human Rights Watch, members of Egypt's state-directed media deliberately destroyed the public reputation of each of the fifty-two men by publishing not only their names, but often also their addresses and places of employment. In

this context, identification is a liability. Thus, Khaled's insistence upon his subject's anonymity functions in one sense as a critique of identity essentialism and its part in the homocolonial project—that is, the colonial imposition and enforcement of a western epistemological regime, with all of its attendant terms, definitions, norms, and expectations related to homosexuality.[33] In another sense, it is a practical investment in the rights and safety of the accused men. In the case of the Queen Boat raids, public strategies like those typically associated with queer activism in the United States, including pride parades, protests, political campaigns, and widely publicized demonstrations like die-ins (in which protesters lie in place, simulating death), are insufficient. They are also potentially disadvantageous to those who are the most vulnerable. The house museum, as both a publicly accessible institution and a private space, might thus serve as an intermediary setting where appeals to the public can be made strategically, while anonymity can still be maintained.

Conclusion: Epistemology of the House Museum

What is most remarkable about *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, then, is that it both preserves the structural logic of the house museum, and at the same time makes its machinations visible to the visitor. This feature is made especially evident by the *House Museum*'s use of narrative. In its very premise, Khaled's *House Museum* trades on the narrativization of the Queen Boat incident by various parties: the Egyptian government, international human rights organizations, the popular press in America and Europe, and (although often overlooked) a generation of gay-identified Egyptians living within the country's national borders and in diaspora. From Khaled's perspective, the Queen Boat raid and others similar incidents represented a strategic move by the Hosni Mubarak (president of Egypt from 1981–2011) regime during the continuous state of emergency prior to his overthrow during the 2011 revolution, especially amid a growing conflict with Islamist groups. Khaled explains:

> Every now and then the [Egyptian] government has to arrest a bunch of gay men to show that they are protecting the values of society more than the Muslim Brothers, and that you can do that without aligning yourself with radical Islam. […] So gay people are always a card they play with in their political games.[34]

On the other hand, Massad contends that members of the "Gay International" capitalized on the events of the Queen Boat trials to advance a homocolonial agenda that first imported the largely Euro-American social and legal categories of gay and lesbian into an Arab national context where they would not otherwise exist, and then found the state regulation of these newly constituted subjects as moral justification for what were often violent interventions in Southwest Asia North Africa.[35]

Some have described the Queen Boat incident as an Egyptian equivalent of the events at Stonewall Inn in 1969, when the prominent gay hangout was subjected to a violent raid by New York City police. The raid sparked a series of protests in the days that followed. Others, like Massad, strongly denounce any such comparison.[36] Khaled's *House Museum* plays to this tension, often subtly, through the juxtaposition of individual cultural texts. In the living room, a bookshelf carries a small collection of memoirs from gay American authors. In the middle of the stack sits Edmund White's *My Lives* (2005), an autobiography set against the backdrop of Stonewall.[37] Nearby, a clip from Egyptian director Maher Sabry's film *All My Life* (2008) plays on a loop: a young gay man is arrested in a violent police raid. Considered alongside one another, these objects remind visitors that, while the events of Stonewall and the Queen Boat may have begun in much the same way, the geopolitical contexts in which each took place were quite different. In American history, the 1969 riots are remembered as a galvanizing moment in the gay liberation movement. A year later, commemorative public demonstrations took place in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, marking the beginning of what would come to be popularized as gay

pride marches and parades. These early displays of pride, which, like the original events at Stonewall, attracted hundreds of participants, were markedly different from the events that occurred following the Queen Boat raid. Many of the Queen Boat attendees arrested on account of their "habitual debauchery" vehemently denied the charges, even claiming to have signed confessions under coercion and threats of torture. Throughout the ensuing media storm, the men arrested bucked publicity and hid their faces from cameras whenever possible. As noted, despite their efforts to remain anonymous, all fifty-two men's names, ages, professions, and places of employment were published in a state-owned newspaper in the days following the arrests.

Khaled's *House Museum* makes clear that the difference between these two historical flash points—the Stonewall Riots and the Queen Boat incident over thirty years later—is largely a discursive one. For those present at the Stonewall Inn that day, the raid was an incitement to speak, and it sparked a mass coming out, from the closet and into the streets. By contrast, the men arrested during the Queen Boat raids prioritized their privacy.[38] But silence and secrecy, as this chapter has shown, are themselves very telling speech acts. The Unknown Crying Man Museum mobilizes a queer diasporic aesthetic that negotiates between the two strategies of visibility and anonymity even as it suggests that the two may be ultimately irreconcilable. This negotiation is made most apparent in the bedroom, where two reflective discs hang above the bed (see Figure 8.3). One is a shimmering gold and the other an iridescent rainbow.

As the only decorative artwork in the bedroom, the discs evoke the post-minimalist compositions of Cuban-American artist Félix González-Torres (1957–96), whose sparse installations dealt frankly with the politics of sexuality, migration, and remembrance. In González-Torres's sculpture *Untitled (March 5th)* (1991), two round mirrors, just barely touching, were installed at eye-level. In *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991), two identical battery-operated clocks were mounted next to each other. Although initially set to the same time, the two clocks were to eventually fall out of sync. González-Torres described these works, like many of his others, as visual metaphors for love and loss during the height of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. Just outside the bedroom of *House Museum*, Khaled makes an additional reference to González-Torres with a photograph displayed in a simple white gallery frame titled *Perfect Lovers (Alexandria)* (2017), presumably after González-Torres's clocks. The image depicts an empty northern Egyptian coastline with two plastic chairs stacked on top of each other. Considered alongside González-Torres's work, Khaled's bedroom installation sets up its own visual metaphor to articulate a queer diasporic subjectivity. Like González-Torres's mirrors, the two metal discs in the Crying Man's bedroom butt up against each other. Although aligned on the wall, they each cast different light over the bedroom. In some spots, as on the bedspread, their reflections seem to overlap, just as the respective queer strategies of pride and opacity, or identity politics and anonymity also occasionally meet. In Khaled's *House Museum*, these strategies do not resolve, but rather sit side by side like two mirrors on a wall.

Notes

1 Mahmoud Khaled, "As If You Weren't In Your Own Home," Mahmoud Khaled (artist's website), accessed November 25, 2023, http://www.mahmoudkhaled.com/-as-if-you-werent-in-your-own-home.

2 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (1977; reis., New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 42. Original emphasis.

3 Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett, "Azima Ila Hayati — An Invitation in to My Life: Narrative Conversations about Sexual Identity," *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 1 (2007): 32–39.

4 Ibid., 32.

5 Andrew Gayed, “Queering Middle Eastern Contemporary Art and Its Diaspora,” in *Unsettling Colonial Modernity in Islamicate Contexts*, ed. Siavash Saffari, Roxana Akhbari, Kara Abdolmaleki, and Evelyn Hamdon (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 142.

6 Jasbir K. Puar, “Homonationalism and Biopolitics,” in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 1–36.

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; reis., Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 3.

8 Ibid.

9 Mahmoud Khaled, “The Pain and Pleasure of Queer Life in Egypt,” interview with Brendan Embser, *Aperture*, April 24, 2019, https://aperture.org/blog/mahmoud-khaled-brendan-embser/. Emphasis added.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Julian Awwad, “The Postcolonial Predicament of Gay Rights in the Queen Boat Affair,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7.3 (2010): 318–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2010.504598.

13 “In the Time of Torture: The Assault on Justice in Egypt’s Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct,” Human Rights Watch, February 29, 2004, https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/02/29/time-torture/assault-justice-egypts-crackdown-homosexual-conduct . Emphasis added.

14 Awwad, “The Postcolonial Predicament,” 319. Emphasis added. Awwad cites Joseph Andoni Massad’s critique of the “Gay International” in his appraisal of the Queen Boat incident. For Massad’s analysis of the events of May 2001, see Joseph Andoni Massad, Chapter Three, “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,” in *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 163.

15 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67; D. A. Miller, “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 14 (1985): 17–38.

16 Linda Young, “Is There a Museum in the House? Historic Houses as a Species of Museum,” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 22.1 (2007): 59–77, https://doi.org/10.1080/09647770701264952.

17 Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge and Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 197–202.

18 Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 125–30.

19 Ibid., 132.

20 Christina Hodge, “A New Model for Memory Work: Nostalgic Discourse at a Historic Home,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 17.2 (2011): 116–35, 116, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2011.541065.

21 Khaled, “The Pain and Pleasure of Queer Life.”

22 Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 67–68.

23 Ibid., 70.

24 Ibid., 69–70.

25 Ibid., 72–74.

26 Miller, “Secret Subjects, Open Secrets,” 19.

27 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*, 42.

28 Ibid., 3–9.

29 Paul Bohannan, *Love, Sex and Being Human: A Book About the Human Condition for Young People* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1970).

30 Carol Vance, “Social Construction Theory: Problems in the History of Sexuality,” in *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?: International Conference on Gay and Lesbian Studies* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij An Dekker, 1989), 13–15.

31 Nicholas de Villiers, “Opacities: Queer Strategies,” in *Opacity and the Closet*: *Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Wisconsin: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 3–6.

32 Ibid.

33 Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 141, 147.

34 Khaled, “The Pain and Pleasure of Queer Life.”

35 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 184–87.

36 Ibid.

37 Edmund White, *My Lives: An Autobiography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005).

38 Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 184–85.

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Chapter 9

Of the Confused Memory: Conor Moynihan in Conversation with Mehdi-Georges Lahlou

Conor Moynihan and Mehdi-Georges Lahlou