CHAPTER SEVEN

QUEERING MIDDLE EASTERN CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS DIASPORA

ANDREW GAYED

Introduction

Current literature engaging with Middle Eastern homosexuality is focused on issues of modernity, multiple modernities, and the West's claim to modernity. Modernity[1] as a time period signals social, political, and historic conditions (typically urbanization, mass production, democratization, etc.) at the end of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. Characteristically within Eurocentric writings of art history, such as that of Paul Wood, Western modernity was seen as the pinnacle of the advancement of modern industrial societies and social progress.[2] While Wood tries to foster dialogue with art produced in contact zones and the impact of the exotic Other on the rest of Europe, he still writes in unwavering favor of European exceptionalism and an imperialist account of history. While paying lip service to the fact that "European knowledge of the wider world was partial, and unmistakably framed by a growing sense of European superiority,"[3] such criticism is lost in his dismissive reading of Orientalist visual art. Furthermore, overarching statements that claim "it was the art of Manet and his followers, the impressionists, that definitively established the connection between modern subjects and modern techniques" reproduce the same Eurocentric canon that relegates the Other as marginal/derivative, and ignores the Egyptian modernist painter Mohamed Nagy (among countless other non-

[1] Not to be confused with Modernism, which points to the cultural trends that respond to the conditions of Modernity in a myriad of ways, such as modern art.
[2] This is evident in his book, *Western Art and the Wider World* (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2014)
[3] Wood, *Western Art and the Wider World*, 143.

Western artists) who visited impressionist painter Manet in Giverny in 1918, and later exhibited in the Paris Salon.[4]

Scholars such as Walter Mignolo, Irene Silverblatt, and Sonia Saldivar-Hull are but a few who question this new imperial structure of power, and examine how modernity can be used to colonize social and cultural practices in the name of Western advancement. They argue that modernity was formed by European philosophers, academics, and politicians, and that modernity involves the colonization of time and space in order to create a border in relation to a self-determining Other and its own European identity. In this way, Europeans colonized the world and built on the ideas of Western civilization and modernity as the endpoints of historical time, and Europe as the center of the world.[5] Mignolo also goes as far to say that coloniality[6] is constitutive of modernity, and there is no modernity without coloniality.[7] Ultimately, the literature on Arab sexualities contends that the West created a discourse around sexuality that the Middle East never had, leading to the notion of homocolonialism, imperialist ideologies in the name of sexual tolerance. As a push against colonial forces and imperialism, homosexuality in the Middle East was then made into an illegal identity category, an identity category that, I argue, did not exist prior to this increased contact with Western explorers and travelers.

Modernity as Imperialism

With scholars unpacking the impacts of Western Modernity and its legacy,[8] much attention is given to issues of language and translation—so simply "speaking" about Arab homosexuality has its pitfalls. For example, the Arabic word for sex, *jins*, appeared sometime in the early twentieth

[4] Saeb Eigner and Zaha Hadid, *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab world and Iran* (London: Merrell, 2010), 19.
[5] Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
[6] This is a term that Mignolo uses in his writing, and signals modernity's elaborate façade of "civilizing" as its necessary foundation in the terror-logic of imperial rule. See Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, x.
[7] Ibid., 3.
[8] Kathryn Babayan, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Dina Al-Kassim, Valerie Traub, Rahman Momin, Joseph Massad, Samar Habib, and Jocelyn Scarlet are only a handful of scholars working to unpack the baggage of Western modernity and its colonial implications. Further discussions on the colonial models, with which they engage, are included in my literature review at the onset of this chapter.

century and held the meaning of both biological sex and national origin.[9] The word, derived from the Greek *genus*, had existed in Arabic since ancient times, holding biological meanings of *type*, *kind*, and ethnolinguistic origins. As late as 1870, its connotations of sex and nationalism had not yet come into usage.[10] Similarly, in the 1950s, translators of Freud coined the non-specific term for sexuality, *jinsiyyah*, which also means *nationality* and *citizenship*. Here, post-contact and under the auspices of colonialism, we see how the Arabic language changed to include sexuality discourses *as a part of* identity discourses, many times indistinguishable from one another. The conflation of sex, sexuality, nationality, and biology introduces an identity discourse that did not exist in the Arabic language prior to the late nineteenth century. This marks a significant shift in local identity scripts being colonized by Western modernity narratives, erasing with it the previously fluid gender norms. This is relevant when looking at surviving Middle Eastern and later Islamic literature from the fourth to thirteenth centuries that narrate examples of homosocial relations and gay desire, none of which illustrates "gay" as existing as a stable identity. Discussing the homoerotic liaisons between the Mamluk elite in late-medieval Egypt and Syria, Everett Rowson states that the public expression of homoerotic sentiments (especially in poetry) was fully sanctioned by Islamic societies both before and during the Mamluk period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but too-public homosexual behavior was not condoned.[11] Likewise, Traub illustrates that Arab-Islamic texts speak frequently of the androgynous beauty of beardless boys and explicitly about anal intercourse and fellatio.[12]

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[9] *Jins'* connotation with nationalism, as I am using it here, did not come into usage until the era of Western modernity. It is worth noting, however, that the etymology of the term draws biological and taxonomical relations to species, origin, sort, and kind. Nationalism in the more contemporary notion of national identity is the later meaning of *jins* and came to be incorporated during this time period.

[10] Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (2002): 371.

[11] Everett Rowson, "Homoerotic Lisaisons among the Mamluk Elite in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2008), 204-238.

[12] Valerie Traub, "The Past is a Foreign Country? the Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi

In establishing the complexities of terming a historically Arab homosexuality, even the term *Middle East* becomes highly problematic as we try to decolonize identity narratives, for the term was a geopolitical and military description coined by European cartographers at the turn of the twentieth century amid the rise of oil explorations.[13] The issue then becomes, *how can we speak about a homosexuality that did not exist as an identity, about a place that is colonially termed, and in a language created to stabilize unstable Arab sexualities?*

Given the colonial hangovers of modernity narratives discussed earlier, even notions of labeling are extraordinarily complicated when considering non-Western examples of homosocial couplings. As Tarik Bereket and Barry Adam's research on gay identities in Turkey contends, the contemporary concept of gay as a particularly generational and classed identity category, dependent on a certain social status and education level. However in MSM (male sex with men) relations, terms such as *active* and *passive* dictate how the individual performs his masculinity, and are more socially relevant categories at the local level.[14] These ideas of masculinity scripts are relatively in line with Judith Butler's notion of performativity, reiterating a type of masculinity that serves to define an identity as either active or passive; the passive subject refuses to take on the active image of the hyper-masculinized, as it conflicts with his identity script as passive. The subtle signs exchanged between an *active* and *passive* individual in public and social settings are an example of the codification present in some Youssef Nabil's photographs. Accordingly in this chapter, I aspire to uncover the visual language that speaks about local sexuality scripts to both the Arab world and the diasporic community in North America, a language that can help navigate these murky waters of subtlety and codification.

Codification and Subtlety

While elsewhere I have examined Youssef Nabil's photographs in the context of nationalism, exile, migration and diaspora, I intend to focus this

(Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2008), 24.

[13] Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2008), ix.

[14] Tarik Bereket and Adam Barryd, "The Emergence of Gay Identities in Contemporary Turkey," *Sexualities* 9, no. 2 (2006): 131-151.

analysis on a series of seemingly homoerotic and subversive photographs that transcend our current understanding of Middle Eastern sexuality. This discussion will focus on Arab homosexualities in terms of desire and alternative masculinities rather than Western notions of homosexuality predicated in "born this way" campaigns. These campaigns are not conducive to understanding broader issues of homocolonial discourses or how queer Arabs living in the West experience their sexuality. That said, I do not wish to reduce the Western model of homosexuality to an essentialist and colonial ruse. Western scholars, such as Judith Butler, argue that gendered identity is an ongoing performance rather than a predetermined genetic identity. It is important to understand here that neither model categorically fits the gendered or sexual identity of the diaspora, nor do they account for the cultural dichotomies negotiated by non-Western subjects in the West.

My intent is to engage with how the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America experiences the impact of homo-colonialism in a less historiographical discussion, and one more rooted in sociological ideas of gender, nationalism, and sexuality, as well as the triangulation of identity and oppression that could arise at their intersection.

In another article, *The Exilic Aesthetic*,[15] I have outlined the formal elements Nabil employs in his artistic practice. His photographs, comprised of hand-tinted silver gelatin prints, become, once again, a site of relevance as we recount the history of photography and the effect of hand tinting on the reality of his photographs. Daguerreotypes amazed the world in the 1830s, but having images appear in full colour rather than the rich sepia tones of early photographs became inescapable. In response, photographers attempted to add colour by hand-tinting the developed photographic image in a series of "colourizing" techniques referred to as "overpainting."[16] These colourizing technologies and techniques were attempts to produce an image that best mimicked realism, and best created an authentic representation of reality. Thus far, I have argued that Youssef Nabil hand-paints his photographs to create an illusory realm within his

[15] Andrew Gayed, "The Exilic Aesthetic: Articulations of Patriotism by the Expatriate," *Persona Journal, The Department of Theatre and Film Arts at the Superior School of Art in Portugal*, Experiments and Displacements 2, no. 1, (2014): 37-54. A revised version of this text can also be found in Andrew Gayed, "Nationalism, Migration and Exile: The Photographs of Youssef Nabil" (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2014).

[16] Patsy G. Watkins, "The Painted Photograph, 1839-1914: Origins, Techniques, Aspirations," in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (1997): 217.

photographs in a way to alter and control the representation of his identity. Though elsewhere I have already argued this contradictory use of hand-painted photography as a method of manipulating personal images is a subversive way to interject lived experience, it is also a method of re-writing Western scripts of Modernity to introduce local narratives of Middle Eastern sexuality.

I begin this analysis with an artwork that references the history of Arab representation and homo-Orientalist imagery. This Orientalist method of representation depicts Arab men as sexually perverse and overly sexual, and seeks to establish their unstable identity categories. It is a method of representation, in which Arabs and Muslims can only be objects of European scholarship but never its subject or audience. In *Malik Sleeping, Paris, 2005*,[17] we have a post-Orientalist depiction of Malik, who functions as both the subject and object. Here, traditional depictions of the European odalisque are subverted and gender norms are also reimagined. The male figure is not nude, but his pants are suggestively lowered. His back faces the audience, which allows us to objectify him and penetrate him with our gaze. This passive pose is not in keeping with traditional depictions of men in the history of visual culture, in which men are usually dominantly placed in the frame and assert eye contact with the viewer. Here, this idea of subverting gendered expectations has parallels to the larger scope of Middle Eastern homosexual desire and the re-conceptualization of sexual identity. As discussed previously in the case of Turkey, contemporary homosexual identity is *not* commonly labeled as gay identity; in fact, it is the *minority* of men who have sex with men that actually identify as gay. However, they have adopted *active* versus *passive* models of identity and masculinity, which manifest themselves in unspoken codes and signs. What I want to think about, then, is why this image is perceived as homoerotic. What is it about this man's manifestation of his masculinity that is not in keeping with Western notions of masculinity, which have a very specific history of the hyper-masculine Marlborough Man and the cowboy genres of representation? Also, what deviation of masculinity is present here that re-codifies this male body as homoerotic? These are larger issues that I intend to address in future research projects, and only begin to address in this analysis.

With this codification of masculinity in mind, I would like to discuss the process of meaning-making in interpreting both masculinity and homosocial desire through Nabil's photographs. In *Ahmed in Djellabah*,

[17] Emin, Tracy, Youssef Nabil, Simon Njami, Mark Sealy, and Michael Stevenson, *Sleep in My Arms* (South Africa: Cape Town, 2007), 21.

New York, 2004[18] and *Ali in Abaya, Paris, 2007,*[19] we have two depictions of men: one wearing an *abbeya* (Ali), which is traditionally used in prayer, and the other a *gallabaya* (Ahmed), which is traditionally worn around the house or as outerwear. These distinctions are relevant, for the codification of masculinity and homoeroticism lies in these details. Ironically, the *gallabeya*, which signifies that this is a private scene, is almost less eroticized than the *abbeya*, which would be for public prayer. The photograph of Ali focuses on his hairy chest and the slit in the *abbeya*, which is very teasingly opened to the man's midsection (and even lower) to accentuate an erotic tension. While the insinuating nature of the man in the *gallabeya* sprawled on the bed with his legs open to the viewer certainly has its implications, I wish to think about how sexuality is experienced in the public and private spheres, and the religious implications when these spheres intersect. Here, I am suggesting that the private becomes public, and there is a de-privatization of homoerotic codification, which is something very different than when looking at historic representations of same-sex desire in Middle Eastern literature. I focus on the geography of the diaspora elsewhere, and it will not be overlooked here. The fact that these photographs were taken in both New York and Paris (and the artist wants audiences to know this by including the locations in the titles) further implicates how the diasporic subject experiences their sexuality in the liminal and in-between identity category discussed earlier.

Emphasizing the geography of diasporic identity once more, the bulk of Nabil's photographs that I analyze are taken outside of Egypt. However, I want to once more look at how the narrative shifts and changes when the location *is* Egypt. In *What Have We Done Wrong, Cairo, 1993*,[20] two men sit ambivalently on a bed, avoiding each other's gazes, and sit in deep contemplation, if not sorrow. While a sexual narrative is not explicit, the deep psychological turmoil of a homosexual encounter is at the forefront of this photograph. The main thing I wish to focus on here is the location: *What Have We Done Wrong* takes place in Cairo.

[18] Emin et al., 65. (Also available on artist's website, accessed January 30, 2015, http://youssefnabil.com/works/cinema/#/46)
[19] Ibid., 71. (Also available on artist's website, accessed Jan. 30, 2015 http://www.youssefnabil.com/works/cinema/#/39
[20] Ibid., 37.

Let us juxtapose this narrative with *Not Afraid to Love, Paris, 2005*.[21] The sexual assertiveness present in this photograph is most certainly distinguished from the fear and trauma experienced in the Cairo representation. In the Paris narrative, the colours are much brighter and much more vibrant than the subdued pink and dark blacks in the Cairo picture.

Where *What Have We Done Wrong, Cairo* has an ominous underground feeling of hiding and shame due to the colour palette, lighting, and dramatic tension, *Not Afraid to Love, Paris* uses colour to imply stability and comfort. Even though the figures are not gazing at each other, the tension is relieved. It is because of this juxtaposition that the subversive nature of these photographs is subtle and seemingly problematic. Each image reflects the general attitudes of the locations, after which it was named. Cairo depicts a sense of shame and wrongdoing, where Paris implies freedom and a sense of peace. Each image seemingly adopts the homonormative tone of its cultural geography. Rather than reduce these complex images to part of what Joseph Massad calls the Gay International, a mission of homocolonialism and Western exceptionalism, I argue that by expressing and representing the real impact of of these cultural attitudes and emotion surrounding them, Nabil is reverting to local identity narratives and codes of masculinity and desire.

Nabil's photographs show the homosocial relations visible in pre-modern social couplings in the Middle East (as outlined earlier in the surviving Middle Eastern and later Islamic literature from the fourth to thirteenth centuries, narrating examples of homosocial relations and gay desire). These local narratives lie in the disidentification of normative Queer identity as it exists in the West and, instead, adopt a queerness rooted in male relations with men rather than predicating an identity category. This fluidity allows the subjects in Nabil's photographs to function outside the prescribed assumptions associated with Western queerness, and rather resembles the sexuality scripts that existed in the pre-colonial period. This is not to say that colonialism completely erased the local sexuality narratives outlined by Babayab, Najmabadi, Habib, and many others, and it does not assume an unproblematic notion that those sexuality scripts existed in a pure state. Bearing in mind Homi Bhabha's writings on hybridity and the location of culture, we can assume that a pure and uncontaminated sexuality script never existed in the Middle East,

[21] Ibid., 53. Interestingly, this image appears on the cover of Brian Whittaker's book, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

even before colonization. What I suggest is to highlight how artists such as Youssef Nabil use photography to illustrate the local sexuality scripts that have become predominantly and overwhelmingly the Western Queer narrative. This narrative is steeped in identity formations that erase the fluid sexuality as seen in the Mamluk Elites of late medieval Egypt, or the homosocial female companionship in seventeenth-century Safavid Iran.[22] I argue that the revival of these local sexuality scripts is seen in Youssef Nabil's homoerotic photography, and that they have an openness to reject the rigidity of a Western Queer identity category. Rather, Nabil's photographs illustrate homosocial relations void of the mandatory homosexual identity that, I have argued, is a product of Western modernity.

The display of male intimacy as relating to homosocial couplings, rather than a gay sexual imagery, helps illustrate the complicated and immensely subversive nature of manifesting the sexuality of the diaspora in a visual language. In *Rashid With a Shisha in his Mouth, Paris, 2004*,[23] we have a scene of a topless young man reclining in shorts, in the act of smoking a shisha, an Egyptian water pipe. Once again rejecting a mandatory homosexuality and instead illustrating a moment of homosociality, Rashid is demonstrating a masculinity that is extremely vulnerable and arguably passive. With the seductive insinuation of Rashid smoking the shisha pipe, we are left with a culturally specific image of a young man engaging in the highly normative act of smoking a shisha with his friend. The vulnerability adds to a reading of the photograph as homoerotic, as it conflicts with the machismo that has been internalized in Western masculinity. With the anomalies of male relationships and of male bodies, Nabil is able to allude to a fluid same-sex desire without labeling the subject of the scene as homosexual. This distinction is essential, as it loosens the grip of the totalitarian gay identity that has been associated with Western queerness and makes it possible for local sexuality scripts to be both vocalized and visualized.

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[22] This is in reference to Kathryn Babayan, "'In Spirit We Ate Each Other's Sorrow': Female Companionship in Seventeenth-Century Safavid Iran," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, MA: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University, 2008), 239-274. Due to the subject matter of Youssef Nabil's photographs, I do not engage with female desire or lesbian relations in this particular analysis. Babayan's text, however, illustrates another example of fluid identity formations present in Islamicate regions prior to colonization.

[23] Emin et al., *Sleep in My Arms*, 67.

The crux of this argument lies in the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America using these local identity narratives of alternative masculinities and codification in a transnational setting. In this way, the localization of homosexual desire, even in Western settings, such as Paris, can further help us understand these local networks of identity on a global scale and how the diasporic subjects in North America frame desire, using narratives that derive from their cultural heritage. What I want to see is whether we can reach a narrative that works beyond the dichotomy of oppression or acceptance, and instead examines a negotiation of diasporic sexuality by incorporating different sociological strategies to help self-identification categories become less dichotomous.

Conclusion

Narrative psychologist Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett has coined the term "letting-in" as a way to negotiate and alter Western narratives of coming out. This is a process that she describes as the conscious and selective invitation of people into one's "club of life," as she puts it. Here, letting-in is a process that is highly relevant to the diaspora, as it is a way to alter perceptions of what it means to live a truly gay life, and falsifies the Western need to become more visible in order to be complete. Nabil's artworks, discussed thus far, exemplify networks of communications that are different from the global-to-local homocolonial imposition of gay identity that most contemporary literature on the topic focuses on. Instead, I argue that these local networks are *let-in* by homosexual, queer, male-desiring subjects in North America, and Middle Eastern diasporic subjects then create an alternative coming-out narrative and identity script to the inscribed Western models. The visual reading of *Rashid With a Shisha in his Mouth, Paris, 2004* can illuminate how local instances of homosociality cite traditional sexuality scripts, and reject the Western queer identity narrative that becomes exclusionary in non-Western contexts. These photographs become just one set of examples of how local networks of identity are transmitted through visual language and how alternative sexuality scripts are written.[24]

[24] Though the dominant historiography of art contends that all non-Western art be compared and drawn from Western examples, it does sometimes prove valuable to take the art-historical narrative within a global context. To illustrate my point on subtlety and the difference between a homosociality and an overt homosexuality, we can compare American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs. The subtlety and identity nuanced within Youssef Nabil's photographs are nowhere to be seen in the vivid depictions of gay pleasure, BDSM, and gay sex. Avoiding

Rahman Momin argues that Islamophobia and homophobia reinforce one another through a process of triangulation. Explaining the lack of belonging to either a Western or Arab discourse of sexuality, Momin claims the Muslim community sees a gay Muslim as an unviable identity, stemming from homophobia and larger systemic issues of racism in our post-9/11 societies. Similarly, Western gay communities also see the gay Muslim as an unviable identity due to Islamophobic and neo-Orientalist discourses that are used to other and isolate Arab narratives in themes of terrorism and social oppression.[25] With the unquestioned assumption of inherent homophobia within an Arab identity, the Western gay community upholds the impossibility of the gay Arab, and fits their existence within pre-existing models of Western homosexuality. Here, the gay Arab is stuck in a perilous existence, within an *in-between* status that makes them an unviable subject in both communities. It is this in-between or liminal existence that the current discourse on Western homosexuality does not account for; this also indicates an urgent need to re-conceptualize the terms in which we understand homosexual identity and its manifestations in social and cultural texts. Referring to the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America as Arab culture continued in America,[26] articulating Arabness becomes a difficult battle between rigid versions of the "Arab" and the "American." The dichotomization between the familiar (Europe, the West) and the strange (the Orient, the East)[27] was reinforced by US media, and, interestingly enough, by the immigrant community itself in an

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value judgments on either set of artwork, it is necessary to highlight the different visual strategies seen in the American gay art movement, and contrast these strategies with the subtlety and strategic identity shifts present in contemporary photography of the Middle East and its diaspora. While I will not touch upon the work of John Ibson in this project, his writing on American photography before the Civil War in the 1950s shows a homosociality similar to that of the male relationships found in the photographs of Youssef Nabil. These mid-century American photographs highlight a sexuality script that is closer to the pre-modern sexuality script we see in the Middle East, one that rejects the totalizing label of gay identity. For more information, see John Ibson, *Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002).

[25] Rahman Momin, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[26] Nadine Naber, "Decolonizing Culture: Beyond Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist Feminisms" in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging*, ed. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany, and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 78.

[27] Ibid.

attempt to distance itself from the media outlets seeking to define them. This leads to an intensification of culture by diasporic communities in North America due to this East versus West, Islamophobic discourse. Arab cultures[28] in North America then become more culturally conservative and religiously stringent, even more so than their counterparts in the homeland. Nadine Naber recounts that many of her neighbors in San Francisco had more socially conservative understandings of religion, family, gender, and sexuality than their counterparts in Jordan.[29] This conflict has to do with issues of culture and hybridity, their intersection, and how diasporic subjects *articulate* culture. What I argue is that given the importance of lived experience and firsthand accounts within sociological studies of expatriation, portraits such as those of Youssef Nabil's lend themselves to an understanding of the transnational experience and illuminate how culture and nationalism are articulated by the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America. The artworks of Youssef Nabil provide an exceptional case study to understand how culture and identity are navigated through political art production and how art is used as a means of necessity and an instrument for self-actualization.

The question we need to ask, then, is how we can work through this predicament of identity without re-inscribing the neo-colonialism of Western gay identity and ultimately reproducing Orientalist understandings of the East-West divide. How can we work past these harmful representations of trauma but still reflect the real lived pain experienced by gay transnational subjects? How can we move towards the possibility for non-viable subjects to become viable, and eventually move towards a place of healing? Theorizing about imperialism and international human rights law, Judith Butler writes that certain lives are not considered lives at all; they cannot be humanized, because their dehumanization occurs at a level that gives rise to a physical violence, delivering the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.[30] This is how we can begin to define unviable and viable identities: dehumanization lies within the neo-Orientalist understanding of Arab sexualities within the strict parameters of being sexually stringent and "backwords" to the sexual models of the West. It is at this site of negation—negation of the local sexual narratives that existed long before contact with the West, negation of models of homosociality that exist

[28] This is not only specific to Arab communities; other immigrant communities also function within similar paradigms when outside of their homeland.
[29] Naber, "Decolonizing Culture," 81.
[30] Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 34.

today and function within their own local forms—that the gay Arab becomes an unviable subject to both the Western and Arab communities, to which they belong. Reviving the local models that existed and continue to exist today, but not conflating them to the Western visibility and coming-out measuring-stick, can result in these Queer Arab subjects becoming viable and living lives void of exile and exclusion in both their cultural and diasporic identities.

Momin has argued that intersectional identities (such as gay Arabs in the West) contribute to a disruption of modernity narratives that underpin Western exceptionalism through queer politics. Here the sheer *existence* of gay Arabs in Western communities (and even those still living in the Middle East) is a disruption of normative identity in either community setting. I wonder how we can bring this discussion of existence to one of codification rather than visibility. While being socially visible or invisible is politically relevant, if not integral, to our discussion, it is important to better identify how masculinity and gay desire are codified in a visual language, and how this language becomes a transcultural way to discuss complex issues such as these and represent a multiplicity of experiences.

Overall, gay Arab societies enjoy subtle networks of expressing sexualities and identities, and these networks have been strongly influenced and changed by discourses of modernity and Western imperialism. What I have found in my study is that the legacy of modernity has not yet erased these subtle networks of communication, and in-between subjects are conflicted by adhering to multiple identity narratives from multiple cultural sources. As we see the plight of the Queer Egyptian in *What Have We Done Wrong, Cairo, 1993*, we can interpret this gloom as the colonial pressure of Western homosexuality and the imperialism of a Queer identity category that actively erases culturally-specific sexuality narratives that already existed. With the intimate artworks Nabil produces in Paris, Brooklyn, Harlem, and numerous other locations outside of Egypt, it becomes evident how diasporic identity and sexuality can globally portray the culturally-specific local narratives of sexuality. In this way, we can see how local sexuality narratives are not passively being colonized by Western Queer discourse; instead, localized understandings of sexualities are being internalized and conceptualized by the diaspora, as exemplified in Nabil's photographs. With the vulnerable images of Rashid taken in Paris or Ahmed in his djellabah in New York, artworks such as those of Youssef Nabil can contribute to understanding these local identity narratives, and how they manifest themselves in the lives of diasporic subjects globally.

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