"ARE YOU GAY?":
A QUEER ETHNOGRAPHY OF
SEX AND SEXUALITY IN CAIRO

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Damascus, Syria:

On June 6th, 2011, amidst the beginning of the Syrian Revolts,[1] Amina Abdallah Arraf al

Omari, a self-identified lesbian living in Damascus, was declared missing. Her cousin wrote on

Amina's web blog, *A Gay Girl in Damascus,*[2]

> Amina was seized by three men in their early 20s. According to the witness (who
> does not want her identity known), the men were armed… Amina hit one of them
> and told the friend to go find her father. One of the men then put his hand over
> Amina's mouth and they hustled her into a red Dacia Logan with a window sticker
> of Basel Assad [the brother of Bashar al-Assad].[3]

Through her blog, Amina, a dual Syrian and American citizen, discussed the dangers of political

and sexual dissent during the terrible massacres conducted by the Syrian Armed Forces on behalf

of the Ba'athist regime of the Syrian state. She blogged about the Syrian opposition movement

and was very critical of the government of Bashar al-Assad. The web blog, which she started on

February 19, 2011, three months prior to her abduction, had acquired a large international

following. Her blog captivated the global imagination with a story of resistance and hope for

"sexual minorities" in an "oppressive" Muslim-majority country. One of her most popular blog

entries discussed how her father supported her when government agents who came to arrest her

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[1] The Syrian Revolts or Syrian Civil War is an ongoing conflict between the ruling Ba'athist regime of President Bashar al-Assad and the people of Syria. The revolts began on March 15, 2011 as part of the Arab Springs, but have not yielded any results. The protesters demand the resignation of President Bashar. Today, the casualties are thought to exceed 60,000 people. For more information see http://syria.jadaliyya.com/

[2] *A Gay Girl in Damascus,* http://damascusgaygirl.blogspot.com/

[3] Marsh, Katherine, "A Gay Girl in Damascus becomes a heroine of the Syrian revolt," *The Guardian,* May 6, 2011, accessed January 22, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/06/gay-girl-damascus-syria-blog.

and threatened to rape her because of her alleged involvement with Salafist organizations.[4]
According to her cousin, Amina had received previous threats from the Syrian authorities, making
government security agents the prime suspects behind her disappearance. Almost immediately, a
large-scale international movement organized by LGBT organizations based in the United States
and Europe called for the release of Amina. She was hailed by the Huffington Post, an online news
organ of the center left in the US, as a "heroine of the Syrian revolution." As a result of global
concern, a Facebook page, *Free Amina Arraf*, was created and reached more than 15,000 followers.
Amina also received attention from international media such as *The Guardian*, *The New York
Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Mashad, Iran:

International news headlines read: "Iran. Young gay man sentenced to death."[5] The world
reported on the execution of 21-year-old Iranian Kurdish Makwan Mouloudzadeh by the Iranian
Islamic Republic on December 4th, 2007.[6] Makwan was convicted at 13 years of age for the rape
of another boy of the same age. Iran leads the world in executing minors. Though in an effort to
deviate attention from human rights organizations, Iran usually postpones the executions of minors
until they are of legal age (18). Another similar case occurred on July 19th, 2005, when Iranian
teenagers Mahmoud Asgari (16) and Ayaz Marhoni (18) were also executed for being gay. The
two boys were hanged in the *Edalat* [Justice] Square of the Iranian city of Mashad.[7] In response
self-proclaimed militant British-based group OutRage! and Paris-based group IDAHO

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Gruppo Everyone, "Iran. Young gay man sentenced to death," *Everyone Group.* December 4, 2007, accessed February 5, 2013, http://everyonegroup.com/EveryOne/MainPage/Entries/2007/12/4_Iran._Young_Gay_man_sentenced_ to_death.html.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ireland, Doug, "Iran Executes 2 Gay Teenagers," *Direland Blog.* July 21, 2005, accessed February 5, 2013, http://direla nd.typepad.com/direland/2005/07/iran_executes_2.html.

(International Day against Homophobia) called for global protest, followed by numerous organizations including the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA).[8] According to American journalist and blogger Doug Ireland, the Iranian government falsely claimed that the youth were executed on charges of rape in order to conceal state oppression of homosexuals.[9] Doug Ireland termed this oppression "Iran's anti-gay pogrom"—the systematic persecution of homosexuals by the Iranian Islamic Republic.[10] The country's attitude towards gays can be summed up in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's statement at Columbia University. When asked about the state of homosexuals in Iran, he immediately responded, "In Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country," when in fact, according to some interpretations of Islamic Law, which forms the basis of the Iranian judicial system, the death penalty is a suitable punishment for homosexual activity.[11]

During the days following Amina's disappearance, doubts regarding the authenticity of her identity began to surface across the internet. On June 12, 2011 the Pro-Palestine website *The Electronic Intifadah* published an investigation presenting evidence regarding Amina's identity as fake or constructed which read:

> We believe the story of Amina to be totally baseless… We also believe that
> whoever is responsible for the hoax is attempting to conceal their responsibility and
> continues to disseminate false information… taking photographs from the
> Facebook page of a totally uninvolved individual and deceptively presenting them
> as being images of Amina… We believe that the person or persons responsible

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[8] Puar, Jasbir. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix-x.

[9] Ireland, "Iran Executes 2 Gay Teenagers."

[10] Ireland, Doug, "Iran's Anti-Gay Pogrom," *In These Times*, January 4, 2006, accessed February 5, 2013, http://www. inthesetimes.com/article/2458/.

[11] "'We don't have any gays in Iran' Iranian President tells Ivy League audience," *Daily Mail UK,* September 25, 2007, accessed February 5, 2013, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-483746/We-dont-gays-Iran-Iranian-president-tells-Ivy-League-audience.html#axzz2K5VchVU4.

should end this deception, which has been harmful to individuals who trusted and believed in "Amina."[12]

The report included an examination of online credentials and the tracking of the IP addresses associated with the website to Edinburgh, Scotland. Hours later, a new post appeared on the *Gay Girl in Damascus* blog; it included a confessional statement by 40-year-old American Tom MacMaster. [13] MacMaster, an American citizen enrolled in the master's program in Medieval Studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, created the blog inventing Amina with the intention of appealing to liberal, English-speaking readers in an effort to draw attention to the violent sexual repression in the Middle East.[14]

As in the case of "Amina," coverage of the Iranian "anti-gay pogrom" was fraught with controversy and confusion. There was never any evidence that the young men executed in Iran were actually self-proclaimed homosexuals. Instead, as the director of Human Rights Watch points out, these executions were "sucked into a search for 'gay identity in Iran" by "Western"[15] LGBT organizations seeking to liberate Middle Eastern homosexuals.[16] In both cases, the young men were executed for *lavat beh on* or rape/sodomy by force, which they committed during their childhood.[17] Through a process of mistranslations and misrepresentations, both cases were

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[12] Abunimah, Ali, "New evidence about Amina, the "Gay Girl in Damascus" hoax," *The Electronic Intifadah,* June 6, 2011, accessed January 22, 2013, http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/new-evidence-about-amina-gay-girl-damascus-hoax.

[13] The blog page today has no content, but the website is still active. Tom MacMaster is hoping to get legal clearance to write a book about the effects and intentions of his online "performance" as "Amina."

[14] Doherty, Benjamin. "Whatever happened to Tom MacMaster, the 'Gay Girl in Damascus' hoaxer?" *The Electronic Intifadah,* December 29, 2011, accessed January 22, 2013, http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/benjamin-doherty/whatever-happened-tom-macmaster-gay-girl-damascus-hoaxer.

[15] The adjective Western refers to the socio-political location of the Western World established through the process of colonialism leading to the construction of the binary between the East as "traditional," "underdeveloped" and "religious" and the West as "modern," "developed" and "secular." Within this dichotomy, the fragmented identities of the "Middle East" become delineated as a category by the imagined and real geopolitical boundaries that discursively categorize it as a group.

[16] Long, Scott, "Unbearable witness: how Western activists (mis)recognize sexuality in Iran," *Contemporary Politics,* 15:1 (2009):119.

[17] Ibid., 123.

portrayed by Western media as proof of the oppression of homosexuals in Iran. Despite any real evidence, OutRage! continues to claim that they have "unidentified" sources attesting to the true motives of the execution: the victims' homosexuality.[18] They go so far as to claim that the 13-year-old victim of the alleged rape actually desired the rape slanting the story towards a consensual same-sex sexual act.

What lies behind this obsessive "interest" in Eastern homosexuals that leads Westerners to misconstrue, imagine, or construct (at times all three simultaneously) narratives of Muslim/Middle Eastern homosexuals? In an attempt to answer this question, Jasbir Puar argues in reference to the Iran case that this "bizarre conjuncture functions as nothing less than the racism of the global gay left and the wholesale acceptance of the Islamophobic rhetoric that fuels the war on terror and the political forces pushing for an Iranian invasion."[19] However, the deployment of a discourse on sexuality in the Middle East does not function as a tactic, strategy, and logistic of contemporary war machines alone. Consequently, where do these stories of "alleged" homosexual oppression and human rights liberation in the Middle East fit into a discourse of globalization and universal and essential categories of sexual and gender differences?[20]

These two cases exemplify many of the themes that permeate throughout this project such as the effects of the use of universal categories and discourses of globalization and liberation. While not entirely representative of this project's subjects and objects of study, they help situate this project within a larger web of bodies, locations, and discourses. Both cases are geographically located in what is constructed to be the Middle East (Syria and Iran), but their reach extends well beyond their geopolitical limitations as they enter the (cyber)spaces of the internet—a virtual

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[18] Ibid., 127.
[19] Ibid., xi.
[20] Ibid., xiv.

representation of the forces of globalization. They gain socio-political significance through the many translations and transformations the cases undergo as they are disseminated globally through the internet. As the stories reproduce images of the Middle East, they enroll international agents of globalization such as Western LGBT organizations, cosmopolitan citizens and worldwide media outlets.

At the same time, both cases, with their fraught valences oriented towards different political and cultural forces and sites, construct images in the Western imagination of unstable oppressive regimes. This Western obsession with gay Arabs and gay Muslims, or the "gay issue," as termed by contributor of the independent e-zine, *Jadaliyya*, Maya Mikdashi, became prominent in Western media alongside coverage of the Arab Springs.[21] After debating the "stability" of the Arab world, the Western media has shifted its focus to the fate of minorities (religious, sexual, etc.) in the developing Arab "democracies." The "gay issue" and the fate of minorities and their rights in the Middle East is a form of self-fashioning for the West to construct itself vis-à-vis the Other or the East as egalitarian, democratized, progressive and civilized. It situates the imagined categories of East and West within a teleological paradigm of development which binds the East and West into their respective opposing extreme poles. The West becomes the sole embodiment of development, equality, secularity and rationality while the East is construed as stagnant, oppressive, religious, and irrational. These imagined differences are what allow for the signification and constitution of a Western identity.

As a result, the West monopolizes many essential universal categories, such as "gay" and "woman," and their increasing "rights" as a signifier of the West's development and progression. For example, Puar argues that the United States, through the inclusion of LGBT subjects (ones

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[21] Mikdashi, Maya and R.M., "Gays, Islamists, and the Arab Spring: What Would a Revolutionary Do?" *Jadaliyya,* June 11, 2011, accessed February 5, 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1836/.

that are properly gendered and raced), developed a US-specific form of sexual exceptionalism that constitutes itself vis-à-vis the constructed image of the "perverse, improperly hetero- and homo-Muslim sexualities."[22] Thus, a US ideal of sexuality and citizenship, which extends to represent the Western-appropriate queer subject, is established—a subjectivity based on participation in the global capitalist enterprise and adherence to heterosexual Western norms.[23] However, many of the subjects that the West (specifically the US) claims to have included and recognized within its national narrative undergo a violent normalizing process—what Puar terms "homonationalism"—that erases and/or regulates their queerness and racialization by valorizing a specific type of subjectivity that adheres to the Western narrative.[24] The liberation of women and homosexuals in the East thus becomes a tool for the extension of the West's self-constituting project outside of its national boundaries without ever questioning the universalized categories established as part and parcel of this project. Questions such as whether a gay identity or homosexual oppression actually exist in the Middle East are never asked. Instead, the Western framework of liberation and universal, natural(ized) concepts and subjectivities are imposed upon othered[25] subjects who might not require the same form of liberation, while maintaining the category of gay or homosexual as an essential universal.

This project is an invitation to a deeper exploration of the "gay issue," which spreads Western Orientalist fantasies of the Other through forces and spaces of globalization by pointing towards the colliding assemblage of revolutions, same-sex practices, Arabness, identity construction, human rights activism, Islamic theology and cyberspaces. It shifts its focus

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[22] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages,*xxvi.

[23] Ibid., 4

[24] Ibid., 2.

[25] The term "othered" is used in reference to the systematic alienation of a group vis-à-vis a group that is deemed the majority or the norm. Othered communities are used discursively to establish a definition or identity of a group in contrast to that of the Other. For example, the socially constructed West is defined through a comparison to its self-constituting other, the East. Through this process, the West is defined by how it is NOT the East.

specifically to urban cosmopolitan Cairo during the aftermath of the "alleged" climax of the Arab Springs—a site ripe with opportunities and ambivalent forces that constitutes it as the ideal queer project.[26] The cosmopolitanism that I deploy regarding Cairo not only invokes its classical meaning as a site for the development of a "world community," but points to Cairo's post-colonial location in a network of global interdependencies that establishes it as culturally porous and raises new political opportunities, exclusionary narratives and opportunities for resistance.[27] Thus, a critical analysis of queer lives in cosmopolitan Cairo demonstrates how the new globalized Middle East is crucial to the construction and regulation of identities and subjectivities and the lived implications for many of the individuals located within these larger networks of power.

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[26] Singerman, Diane and Paul Amar, "Introduction: Contesting Myths, Critiquing Cosmopolitanism, and Creating the New Cairo School of Urban Studies," in *Cosmopolitan Cairo: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Globalized Middle East*, ed. Diane Singerman and Paul Amar, (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2006), 10.

[27] Ibid., 30-31.

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This work is indebted to those acknowledged here and many more. We are all part of the larger network of powers that shape, discipline and inscribe our bodies and give rise to the assumptions that permeate our relationships—encounters fraught with risk and saturated with emotions and rewards that are those "unforgettable" moments.

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Chapter 1

The Frailty of Theory and Concepts:
Revolution, Queer Methodologies, and Unexpected Encounters

Today marks two years since the so-called "January 25th Revolution" and police brutality, state oppression and poverty are still prevalent in Egypt. President-on-the-verge-of-dictator Hosni Mubarak was deposed, a transitional government ruled by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) was established, and "democratic" elections were held, but did anything truly change? Did the January 25th Revolution actually bring the transformations the protesters in Tahrir Square and all across Egypt demanded? Can we celebrate the anniversary of the revolution even as protesters continue to assemble every Friday in Tahrir Square?

The 18 days following January 25th, 2011 brought visible institutional changes. During these days protesters from all over the country were able to topple the "Mubarak Regime," or at least its figurehead: President Hosni Mubarak. SCAF demanded, "on behalf of the people," the removal of Mubarak while they established a transitional government to regulate the shift in power. However, not all of the changes created positive effects. The SCAF transitional government and the Morsi "regime" have continued the same asymmetrical power relationships of the Mubarak regime.[28] Many comparisons are made between Morsi and Mubarak, as if the former is just an extension of the latter. These comparisons are ubiquitous throughout the internet and are the subject of many blogs and cartoons. An example of a cartoon "Mursi Mubarak" by Algerian

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[28] Cook, Steven, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

political cartoonist Khalil Bendib is reproduced here.[29] Today, Tahrir Square continues to be a site of public demonstration and state repression as concrete walls are erected daily to restrict movement in and out of the square—a move straight out of Mubarak's playbook.

This post-January 25th period opened up spaces filled with opportunities as a result of many bloody and violent encounters with state agents and institutions. During the 18 days of the January 25th Revolution, media outlets worldwide discussed the historic event as not only a site of political opportunity, but also as the beginning of a sexual(ity) revolution that had the potential to simultaneously transform understandings of gender and sexuality in Egypt and provide rights to women and sexual minorities.[30] It is this (post) revolution period and the conceptual power embedded in the term "revolution" that signals the significance of the object of this project: queer Egyptian men.

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[29] Bendib, Khalil, "Mursi Mubarak," *Jadaliyya*, February 5, 2013, Accessed February 7, 2013, http://www.jadaliyya. com/pages/index/10007/morsi-mubarak.

[30] The role of women during the January 25th revolution and their significance serves as a contour line giving shape to this project, but falls beyond its scope. During the revolution, women made up around 50% of the protesters. However, their roles and visibility during the revolution were exploited by the Western media as a way of reinforcing the hierarchical structure between the East and the West by inciting a liberation discourse that labeled the West as superior and more developed vis-à-vis the East.

But were the events of January 25th truly revolutionary? From the outset, the term *thawra* [revolution] was used invoking images of violent popular uprisings and shifts in political structures. However, the term "revolution" is commonly misused and misunderstood as pointed out by Dale Yoder.[31] Different scholars and media outlets will routinely use "revolution" to explain various events.

> To some it is an exclusive political change, a shifting in the location of sovereignty. To others it is a change in any of several aspects of the life of society, and it takes its particular form according to the institution with which it is most obviously associated. To still others it is an extensive and inclusive social change affecting all the various aspects of the life of a society, including the economic, religious, industrial, and familial as well as political.[32]

The characterization of January 25th as a revolution refers to only one of these limited definitions: a popular uprising that changed the sovereign leader. The January 25th Revolution has not even ended under this definition. Thus, how can it be called a revolution if its effects have not yet been achieved?

However, characterizing the January 25th uprising as a revolution occludes some of the contemporary movements that led to the uprising's political impact, such as the labor movement in the 2000s, the *Kefaya* [enough] movement[33], the "We Are All Khaled Said" campaign[34] and

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[31] Yoder, Dale, "Current Definitions of Revolution," *American Journal of Sociology,* 32:3 (1926).

[32] Ibid., 439.

[33] The *Kefaya* movement refers to the *el-Haraka el-Masreya men agl el-Taghayeer* [Egyptian Movement for Change] a grassroots coalition that opposed Hosni Mubarak's dictatorship after the announcement of Mubarak's run for re-election during the 2005 "election" following a 24 year term and his maneuvering of the political system so as to ensure his son's succession as the President of Egypt. The movement started the summer of 2004 and continued until the January 25th Revolution. For more information: "'Kifaya' in Egypt," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2005, accessed March 31, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35379-2005Mar14.html.

[34] The "We Are All Khaled Said" campaign arose after the brutal murder of a small business man in Alexandria named Khaled Said by the police in June 6, 2010. Its central activity occurred online through a Facebook group "We Are All Khaled Said" expressing dissent by showing images and sharing stories of police brutality. The Facebook group also served as an organizational hub for the January 25th Revolution. For more details: Giglio, Mike, "'We Are All Khaled Said': Will the Revolution Come to Egypt?" *The Daily Beast*, January 22, 2011, accessed March 31, 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/01/22/we-are-all-khaled-said-will-the-revolution-come-to-egypt.html.

many others.[35] Most of these prior movements served as points of origin for the uprising on January

25th by inciting public discourse regarding the injustices perpetuated by the Egyptian state.

Regardless of whether or not January 25th was the beginning of a revolution, it is a date that created

a shift in the country's history. January 25th captured the imagination of more than 80 million

people in Egypt alone. It served as a symbol of hope for the many people that had been systemically

oppressed by the state of Egypt. People all around the world describe it as an event that opened up

the fate of Egypt and its many residents to change.

Queer Ethnography: An Anthropological Tactic

Similar to the conceptual power of "revolution," the term *queer* and emerging out of queer

theory offers critical practices with the potential to create and envision subversive and radical

change. Queer theory, which serves as one of the fields of study whose theoretical tools this project

draws upon, arose in the early 1990s, among other things, as a critique of US lesbian and gay

academic and political movements' conceptualization of homosexual identities as bases for politics

and scholarship. These national lesbian and gay movements were seeking inclusion for

"homosexuals" in US society. They argued, and continue to do so today, that lesbians and gays

should be seen as the people "next door," whose desire was to fulfil a normal life of marriage,

patriotism, and domesticity.[36] Instead, queer theory argued that the process of normalization rather

than simple intolerance and exclusion was the site of social violence.[37] As a result of the increasing

opposition to the widespread fetishization of the normal and the large-scale rise of AIDS activism

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[35] Beinin, Joel. "Was There a January 25 Revolution?" *Jadaliyya*. January 25, 2013, accessed February 17, 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/9766/was-there-a-january-25-revolution.

[36] Berlant. Lauren and Michael Warner, "What does Queer Theory Teach Us About X?" *PMLA* 110 (1995), 345.

[37] Warner, Michael, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), xxvi.

(which refused to draw boundaries around its constituents), a new movement organized around this "new" concept of *queerness* arose which embodied the anti-normative characteristic of the movement and the difficulty of defining the population invested in queer politics.[38]

It has been 20 years since the emergence of the term *queer* as elaborated by queer theory, and much has changed within this field of study. It began as an extension of the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and early Eve Sedgewick, and of many others[39] that drew attention to the role of sexuality (and its discourse) as a field of regulation, therapy, and liberation and its centrality in all manifestations of social organization and categories, such as:

> Secrecy / disclosure, knowledge / ignorance, private / public, masculine / feminine, majority / minority, innocence / initiation, natural / artificial, new / old, discipline / terrorism, canonic / noncanonic, wholeness / decadence, urbane / provincial, domestic / foreign, health / illness, same / difference, active / passive, in / out, cognition / paranoia, art / kitsch, utopia / apocalypse, sincerity / sentimentality, and voluntary / addiction.[40]

Today, *queer* is used both as an umbrella term for the entire LGBT rainbow assortment of subjects and as a non-category that defies definition and normality. The most prominent example of this latter use of *queer* is exemplified by Sedgwick's 1993 conceptualization of *queer* as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically."[41] Queer theory has many branches insofar as it has taken root and developed throughout a variety disciplines.[42] It has extended its object of study to include

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[38] Ibid., xxvi-xxvii.

[39] Warner, Michael, "Queer and Then?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 1, 2012, accessed April 14, 2013, http://chronicle.com/article/QueerThen-/130161/.

[40] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Epistemology of the Closet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 11.

[41] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Tendencies*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

[42] Warner, "Queer and Then?"

empire, globalization, terrorism, immigration, diaspora, race, and much more.[43] However, queer theory is at the same time an academic orphan, for it cannot be located in one department and is commonly institutionalized as a subfield of Gay and Lesbian Studies and Women's Studies.[44] As a result, queer theory deploys *queerness* as a way of expounding the limitations of not only sexual categories, but any binary or identificatory term, while simultaneously opening interpretative possibilities for subversive and radical change.

Throughout this thesis, I invoke queer theory and the term *queer* specifically because they capture the sexual fluidity and the difficulty of naming and establishing universal identities that problematize binarial conceptualizations of sexuality and assist me in understanding the complexity of the subjects I call *queer* in Egypt. I understand the complexity (and imperialistic project) of using a Western term to describe sexual practices in the Middle East, but through the use of *queer* I hope to destabilize such an imperialist and hegemonic understanding by engaging with it critically, as I think moves across the East/West binary. The term *queer* and the field of study, queer theory, also provide me the opportunity to explore throughout this work the potential openings for resistance and change that *queerness* provides.

However, not all queer projects are able to firmly establish an argument for the subversive change they advocate. They run the risk of falling into the conceptual trap that also haunts the term "revolution" by never fully materializing their promise of real lived effects. In short, some queer projects are "all [theoretical] bark and no [embodied] bite." One example of a queer project that falls short is the recent work *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) by Judith/Jack Halberstam, a central figure in contemporary queer theory. Halberstam claims that "Failure is something queers do and

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[43] A perfect example of this expansion in queer theory is Puar's work *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times.*
[44] Warner, "Queer and Then?"

have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depends upon 'trying and trying again.'"[45] Ze[46] claims that failure allows a subject the possibility to uncover realities and possibilities not allowed through the normal understanding of success, allowing for the deconstruction of (hetero)normalizing and disciplining structures such as the education system that seems to produce a singular definition of success—one that is informed by ascension of the corporate bureaucratic ladder with monetary reward as its prime goal.[47] Halberstam's seductive language and rhetoric entrances the reader with the idea of failure as a queer practice, and yes, in some cases it seems applicable and almost believable. However, how would a systematically and culturally failed subject such as an undocumented migrant worker come to terms with this conceptualization of failure? Would failure work for him/her as a sustainable lifestyle that serves as a site of possibilities or opportunities? It seems that failure as a queer way of life is only primarily available for subjects in a privileged social position where the societal consequences of failure are not entirely detrimental to one's survival.

Being cautious of the dangers and risks of queer theory, I mobilize it as an anthropological tool for the development of a *queer ethnography*. By prefacing ethnography with queer, I do not mean that this project is queer simply due to its focus on queer subjects in Cairo. Instead, as argued by Alison Rooke, a queer ethnography utilizes queer theory to question the conventions and methodology of ethnographic research.[48] Ethnography itself is already marked as queer for it is not exactly a method, but more of an intellectual principle based on the concept of participant

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[45] Halberstam, Judith, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3.
[46] "Ze" is a gender-neutral third-person singular object pronoun.
[47] Ibid, 6.
[48] Rooke, Alison, "Queer in the Field: On Emotions, Temporality, and Performativity in Ethnography," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Queer Theories and Social Science Research,* ed. Kath Browne and Catherine Nash, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), 25.

observation. There is no "proper" ethnographic method and it is filled with epistemological, ontological and ethical dilemmas.[49] Ethnography offers the possibility of contradicting, criticizing, extending and fine-tuning theory by inserting people and knowledge of the world. However, ethnography is bound by a set of assumptions, such as a defined time and space of the "field" and an ontological ethnographic self. Thus, to *queer* ethnography is to challenge and curve these assumptions.[50]

Rooke suggests that ethnographic methodology is constructed on the assumptions of a fictitious ethnographic time and space. A researcher enters the field at a specific time and place. However, where does the "field" start and end? Its boundaries are not as clear as they are thought to be. What if I run into a participant after I have left the field? Is that a moment of fieldwork? What if my field is my home—then when and where does my ethnographic time and space start and end? As Halberstam points out, time and space are social constructions that are internalized and are a product of postmodernism.[51] Thus, ethnographic practice establishes its own temporal and spatial normativity.[52]

Understanding the blurred spatial and temporal boundaries of ethnography is part of a queer ethnography as relationships established in the field transgress ethnographic time and space. For example, the cyber-ethnographic project of chapter three functions in a queer time and place due to the ephemeral structure of cyber-exchange as a sporadic virtual encounter. The interchanges of messages, photos, videos and cyber-sex defy a specific location and time that could be categorized as ethnographic time and space. Rooke also suggests that a queer ethnography further disrupts the

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[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Halberstam, Judith, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives,* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.
[52] Rooke, "Queer in the Field," 29.

field's temporal and spatial normativity by problematizing the splitting of ethnographic practice between research and writing as an experience that requires the ethnographer to be in two places at the same time—in and out of the spatially and temporally bounded fields simultaneously.[53] Instead, Rooke points out how the field is "intersubjectively constructed by the ethnographer," therefore s/he is the only person who inhabits the field as "the field."[54]

A queer ethnography is also characterized by the disruption of the ontological ethnographic self that tends to be at the center of anthropological reflexive writing.[55] It aims to show the fluid and constantly changing social position of the ethnographic self for the constitution of identities is itself a contextual process. Clifford Geertz reminds us that the ethnographic process destabilizes the ethnographer's sense of self: "You don't exactly penetrate another culture, as the masculinist image would have it. You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you."[56] Thus, a queer ethnography undoes the convention of establishing the ethnographer as a stable self, for as s/he becomes embedded in the ethnographic process, s/he also undergoes a constant shift in identity and subjectivity. At the same time a queer ethnography calls attention to the ethnographer's own "subjectivity, positionality and embodiment" by exposing his/her attachment to identity categories.[57]

Lastly, *"Are You Gay?" queers* ethnographic practice through the writing and analysis of personal erotic or sexual exchanges. Don Kulick points out how, traditionally, personal sexual encounters were absent from ethnographies as a way of maintaining objectivity and focus on the "object of true significance"—the object of research—and to conceal the network of powers that

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[53] Ibid., 30.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid., 35.
[56] Geertz, Clifford, *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 44.
[57] Rooke, "Queer in the Field," 35.

make such encounters possible.[58] However, he argues that instead of concealing their erotic subjectivity, ethnographers should explore the implications of being a "sexually cognizant knower[s]" and how their erotic subjectivities can be sites of exploration that add an additional dimension to their work. Margot Weiss and Jafari Allen have taken on Kulick's challenge, with their recent works paving the way for the production of queer ethnographies that are self-reflexive of erotic subjectivities.[59] As a result, throughout this work, I analyze sexual encounters as a primary site for the production of knowledge that points towards the intricate relationship between power, desire, sex, and identity.

Cruised in Cairo: Risk in a House of Mirrors

"The two men at the table behind us are staring at me" I mentioned in slight panic to my classmates while playing cards at a *qahwa*[60] in back alley of Zamalek, an affluent neighborhood located on an island in the middle of the Nile River. "No, they are not. You are probably exaggerating," responded Hannah while laughing. Then, almost immediately, my three classmates turned around simultaneously to verify my claim and encountered the unabashed gaze of two Egyptian men in their twenties. Awkwardly, Hannah said hi to the men in order to avert the tension produced by the intersecting gazes. The two men introduced themselves: Mohammed a 23-year old personal trainer from the Cairo neighborhood of Ma'adi and Ahmed, a 25-year old cashier at

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[58] Kulick, Don, "Introduction: The Sexual Life of Anthropologists: Erotic Subjectivity and Ethnographic Work" in *Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, ed. Don Kulick and Margaret Wilson, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

[59] Weiss, Margot, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and Allen, Jafari, *¡Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[60] A *qahwa* [coffee] is an Egyptian Café. They come in all shapes and sizes catering to different economic classes. In these overly-crowded places people (mainly men except in higher class *qahwas* where some women are seen) read the newspaper, play board games such as dominoes, cards, *tawla* [backgammon], watch soccer games or just congregate after work. Even though they are called *qahwa* or coffee the ubiquitous drink is *shai* or tea. The most prominent aspect that differentiates it from an American café is that *shisha* [hookah] is served.

Cinnabon. As Hannah, Jonathan, Leena and I introduced ourselves, the men became ashamed when they realized that Leena is Egyptian and fluent in Egyptian Arabic; she had fully understood the comments they had been making about us. We talked for about half an hour and, then, decided to head back to our dorm rooms at the American University in Cairo (AUC). Before departing, they asked Leena to exchange phone numbers with them to stay in touch. While Leena looked for her phone, I gave them my number to protect her from potential harassment as was experienced by my classmate Leila a few days prior.

During the subsequent days, Mohammed constantly communicated with me asking me to meet with them. Since I could not entirely understand him over the phone, I kept asking him to text me since I was able to understand written Arabic better than the Egyptian dialect at that time. His messages usually read "meet at the *qahwa* in an hour." However, due to the schedule of our study abroad program, these rendezvous were not possible. Why was he so persistent? What was he expecting from us? This was exactly why I had stopped Leena in the first place from giving them her number.

A few days later, while playing *tarnib*[61] at the same *qahwa*, our paths crossed. Mohammed approached our table. "Come join us at our table," he said in broken English. "*Ba'ad al-lab ehna harouh*" [After the game, we will come], I responded. He came closer, and whispered in my ear "*enta bas*" [only you]. He walked away, and rejoined his group while pointing us out to them. I did not know what to do. Why only me? Should I join them or just ignore the invitation? After a while, curiosity got the best of me, and I joined them after the game (after, of course, establishing safety precautions with my classmate Leila). I sat with the four of them. They, then, offered me their drinks. I politely refused not knowing their contents. Ahmed, the man from the original

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[61] *Tarnib* طرنيب is a popular trick-game played in various Middle Eastern countries. The rules vary from country to country sometimes played in teams or individually.

encounter, persistently offered me his drink again. In order to appease them, I took a sip of his Lemon Mint, and proceeded to tell him it was good. "More, more," he demanded. I nervously took another sip, while beginning conversation to shift attention away from the drink. I introduced myself as did they. In addition to Ahmed and Mohammed, there was Akram and Mahmoud. Akram spoke the best English out of the group; his father, he explained, works as a translator. He was twenty three years old and the scrawniest of the group. Mahmoud was twenty two, wore glasses with bright yellow frames and had a chiseled jaw with a square chin. He was also a film student at Cairo University and as a result spoken English well. Akram and Mahmoud became the impromptu translators.

After the series of introductions, they talked among themselves for a few minutes. Then they closed in on me and asked me, "Do you like men and women?" Shocked by the forwardness of the question, I answered with a quick yes. They then proceeded to tell me that all of them were bisexual with the exception of Ahmed, who protested, saying he was straight. Then, the series of questions began: What do you prefer: men or women? Do you bottom or top? What is your favorite sexual position? Confused by their abrupt manner, I evaded all the questions. I signaled to Leila via text message to come and save me as I was beginning to feel uncomfortable as four men, who I did not know, were insistently asking about my sexuality and sex life. While waiting for Leila to arrive, I deflected all their questions by claiming that I was not used to disclosing details about my sexual life to people during first encounters. "You are the most close-minded Westerner I have met," Mahmoud responded laughingly. I never thought of myself as close-minded. In fact, I tend to be one of the more open-minded members of my friend group back at Duke University and home, or so I imagined myself, but for some reason disclosing my sex life to strangers in Egypt

terrified me. At this moment, I also realized that they were never after Leena or the other girls in my study abroad group. They were interested in me, and not just as a friend.

When Leila arrived, they invited her to sit with us. Akram and Mahmoud began talking to her about her Iranian heritage. They expressed disdain towards Iran and constantly referred to how oppressive a country it is. At the same time, Mohammed and Ahmed continued their questions. This time, however, the questions were no longer about me. "What is gay life like in the US? Is it true that there are "gay" clubs? What about two men getting married, how is that possible if it goes against "nature?" I tried to answer all their questions while at the same time stating that gay life is not the same for everyone in the US and that I can only speak from my own experience. I sensed they were just curious about other ways of life. This conversation lasted until three in the morning. My classmates had already returned to the AUC dorms. I said goodbye to them and began to head back. Before leaving, Ahmed, who had been staring intently at me the entire time, said to me through the help of Mahmoud's translation, "You have a beautiful smile and eyes. Hope to see you again."

I never expected for the lives and subjectivities of queer men in Cairo to become the topic of my thesis project. It was due to this unexpected turn of events that my project transformed into what it is today. Originally, I was participating in a study abroad program in Cairo and Qatar studying religious citizenship and performing a community-based research project at the Resala Training Center (RTC) in Dokki, Cairo.[62] I was also teaching English and Spanish at RTC and doing fieldwork for my senior thesis about the role of NGOs such as Resala in establishing

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[62] Resala (The Message) is the largest NGO in Egypt with more than 60 branches throughout the country. It was started in 1999 as a student movement at the Department of Engineering at Cairo University. Resala provides different services to many communities and neighborhoods in Cairo including, but not limited to: feeding the poor, a foster family program for orphans, taking care of the elderly, small business initiatives, restoration of mosques, blood drives, literacy programs and assistance for the blind.

networks for the organizing of the January 25th Revolution and subsequent political movements.[63] However, through this initial encounter with the subjects that now inhabit the pages of this project—a form of accidental cruising filled with sexual exchanges and fulfillment of desires—I gained access to one of the many underground networks that exist in the cosmopolitan pandemonium of Cairo. I slowly became enveloped in their world, quickly learning that once you are "in the know," a different view of Cairo is unveiled. Cairo is a house of mirrors in which nothing is what it seems. For example, the *qahwa* that my classmates and I attended nightly was a deemed in this world a "gay café" or a meeting place for the exchange of bodies and the creation of homosocial relationships tinted with homosexual desires accessible to those who knew where to look. There was nothing about the *qahwa* that signaled it at as a "gay café." I doubt the owners knew. Regardless, for these men it served as node in a larger (underground) network of spaces that facilitated the fulfillment of their bodily pleasures.

During the remaining two months of my trip, I continued to spend time with this group of men. We shared many experiences such as a week-long trip to Alexandria, multiple parties, nightly conversations at many *qahwas*, etc. After my study abroad group left and I was in need of housing, they helped me find a place to stay by going to hotels late at night and asking about their rates and contacting *simsars,* or real estate agents. They even became my support group when I received unfortunate news from home and planned a day-long outing to a "country club" to distract me from my thoughts and anxiety about being half-way around the world and unable to do anything about the situation. My classmates often asked me how I felt so comfortable with them since I did not really know them. Why would I put myself at risk by going on a week-long trip to Alexandria

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[63] Resala served as a central organizing node for the January 25th Revolution. For more information: El Sharnouby, Dina, "Youth and the 25th Revolution in Egypt: Agents of Change and its Multiple Meanings," MA Thesis http://dar.aucegypt.edu/bitstream/handle/10526/2816/Dina_El_Sharnouby_MA_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1

with a group of strangers? Our relationship was built upon the inherent risk of our exchange—an unveiling of identities and practices that are sometimes the target of state repression. They trusted me enough to invite me into their community and allow me access to its secrets, for it was a reciprocal risk. I was placing myself in a vulnerable space by sharing my stories and identities that also locate/inscribe me as a subject susceptible to scrutiny and regulation in a global and transnational network of power. As a result, I also placed my trust in them and made choices that in many situations could have led to dangerous outcomes and fatal consequences. Isn't risk part of the emotional labor required of many sexual encounters and exchanges (and all relationships) after all?

However, after I shifted the focus of my project from a study of the January 25th Revolution to the lives and subjectivities of queer men in Cairo, I was very clear about my intentions. I clearly stated to them that I wanted to write about my experiences and exchanges with them. Though they found it absurd that anyone would want to write about their lives, they consented to being part of this project. They were confident that I would protect their identities and, as a result, all the names of people and specific places I use are pseudonyms. At times I even abstain from providing specific compromising information. They were also aware that I was writing nightly reflections in my fieldwork journal and constantly asked me to tell them what I was writing down. I shared with them many of my reflections and notes leading to the strengthening of our relationship and further discussions on topics that permeate throughout this project such as identity politics, liberation discourse, global forces, religious beliefs and sexual practices.

This entire project is embedded in the possibilities created by the risky nature of our interactions. The process of taking on an identity (or in some cases solely engaging in same sex practices) is after all inherently risky by making oneself vulnerable to the scrutiny and benevolence

of the public, society, family, and state. Taking on an identity is a game of risk with a multiplicity of outcomes. It makes one legible to disciplinary forces and systems that seek to regulate social experiences and encounters. It is here where the conceptual power of queer theory comes into play by problematizing identity scripts, and thus illegible to normalizing forces—a survival strategy for many. The (post) revolutionary period which serves as the backdrop of this project is also fraught with risk and danger. It is a period in which the social fabric is torn apart, ripped, and becomes available for its re-suturing and re-arrangement in a variety of forms (some which may be expected while others unexpected). This (post) revolutionary period situates this project and the lives of queer men in Egypt at a specific historical (and crucial) moment for the re-evaluation of social and cultural norms.

Risk is also inevitable in any project for social change. Only by opening oneself to the unexpected outcomes produced as power is restructured can change truly be created. As an activist and someone who seeks to destabilize the normalizing and limiting structures that dictate and regulate our everyday encounters, I engaged in this risky endeavor with the hope of deconstructing and exposing the many networks of power that keep us in our respective place in a natural(ized) global hierarchy. One of the goals of this project is exactly that—to break down the assumptions that shape our encounters with the "other" by showing the absurdity and constructed disposition of natural(ized) binaries and identities such as Western/Eastern, Male/Female, Gay/Straight, etc. However, I am also conscious of my own privileged position as a Western academic which allowed me the opportunity to engage in this project. I was able to transgress socio-political as well as geographical boundaries that maintain a hierarchical structure by keeping "us" separated from "them"—a form of mobility not available to everyone and facilitated by my place within the structures of an elite university bankrolled with high tuition fees and an astronomical endowment.

This project is as much about me as it is about them for anthropological and ethnographic method transforms my body into a producer of knowledge. Through these pages, I hope to incite discussion regarding networks of power, globalization, sexuality, liberation discourse, and more through an analysis of my fieldwork experiences in Cairo with this group of queer men. Though hope for change might be a lofty goal (and realistically an unattainable one), the perpetual violence (structural, physical, psychological, and emotional) created by global forces (and at times reiterated by academic and public discourse) functions as the key motivation of this project.

Chapter 2

Identity is a Gamble:
Circulating Desires, Pleasures and Sexualities in Cosmopolitan Cairo

I knew this day would come. Three weeks had gone by since our first encounter. In the darkness of my quaint apartment located across from Kit Kat Square,[64] Cairo, two bodies were becoming intertwined. With the dawn call to prayer playing in the background, I closed my eyes. I felt a hand explore my body, aided by a set of lips. Thighs. Hips. Chest. Neck. Lips. Ear. "*Slowly.*

Slowly," I protested. If Ahmed had been a woman this bodily encounter could not have happened. If he had been a woman, Mahfouz, the *bawab*[65] [doorman], would have stopped us on our way in, and interrogated us about our relationship. If Ahmed had been an Egyptian woman, he would have been charged with adultery and faced up to two years imprisonment.[66] If had been a foreign woman, he would have been allowed into my apartment building solely because I am also a foreigner, and in exchange for becoming the building's weekly gossip. Instead, Ahmed and I walked into the building inconspicuously, waving at the *bawab*. We were two young men the *bawab* and the rest of society assumed blithely to be friends... "*Slowly. Slowly.*" *[End sex scene].*

While resting my head on Ahmed's chest, I saw tears trickling down his cheek. I asked in Arabic "*kulu tamam?*" [is everything fine?]. He nodded in response and muttered something in Arabic that I did not understand. This moment of intimacy, if not fully understood, gave me the courage to ask a question that I had been wondering since I had first met Ahmed, "How come you

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[64] Kit Kat Square was named after one of the boat clubs on the Nile during the British occupation of Egypt: Kit Kat Cabaret.

[65] Most Arabic words that are used throughout this chapter are local Egyptian dialect. Dialect is not commonly written in Arabic script; as a result I will use common English transliterations.

[66] Halawi, Jailan, "Equally to Blame," *Al-Ahram Weekly,* August 22, 2001, accessed February 21, 2013, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2001/547/li5.htm.

identify as straight? What does that make us and what just happened?" He responded with a confused face, "*ma fahimish*" [I don't understand]. I thought the reason why he didn't understand me was my imperfect Egyptian Arabic, so I grabbed my computer. Mediated by Google Translate, a sort of threesome mediated by technology, I asked my question again. He typed his response, "I am not gay, if that is what you are asking." Out of frustration I pointed at myself and said "*ragul*" [man]. "No. You are a ladyboy."

Everything I knew or thought I knew fell apart. He had cornered me. I did not know how to respond. This sexual game was over and the cards were stacked against me. The assemblage of fragmented identities that I thought constituted who I am was being hacked up slowly and painfully. The fissures were not clean or smooth. Instead, natural(ized) identities and networks of power had been destabilized and scrambled. Ahmed had interpellated me as a different gender, a "ladyboy," solely because of my appearance, small build and long hair, and the sexual role I played.[67] My sexual identity and social position was now dependent on the benevolence of Ahmed. The power relations that conventionally define the East-West dichotomy were destabilized, leaving me with no anchors in the quickly changing and fluctuating matrix of power. However**,** in this double interpellation I had not solely shifted in genders in relation to Ahmed's performance and assertion of masculinity, but I had also imposed, through my questioning of his self-understanding, my assumptions and understandings as a Western assimilated subject of how sexuality and identities work.[68] These Western-origin assumptions are what this chapter hopes to deconstruct by conceptualizing Egyptian sexualities from within the interweaving of institutions,

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[67] I am using gender as explained by Kate Bornstein in *My Gender Workbook*. She understands it as a "social construct, which includes respectful nods to biology, physiology, and psychology," but also as categorical term for power/status differences. Bornstein, Kate, *My Gender Workbook,* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 35-47.

[68] In the text I make crude binary to exacerbate the forces that flow with power, but in reality my social position is constantly in flux. My specific background and history marks me as a diasporic and racialized subject within the larger networks of power.

religions, cultures and histories that produce and regulate them. At the same time this chapter seeks to explore constructions of masculinity and stigma within the active/passive divisions in same-sex practices, while being conscious of the effects of western influences in the construction of a roulette of identities that compose the social map of gender, sexuality and power.

Cultural Relativism: Abandon All Assumptions Ye Who Enter Here

Before beginning to outline Arab-Muslim sexualities and analyze some of their specificities through my research experiences in Cairo, it is important to understand this caveat: This part of the project is shot through with the politics of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism, a central anthropological methodological tool, asks us to be conscious (and at times strip ourselves) of any assumptions formulated a priori. This principle reminds us to situate particular phenomena as products of their specific contexts. Therefore, for a cultural relativist, no single incident can be critiqued by a universal standard—a productive methodological tool to inhibit essentialist and universal assumptions. Cultural relativism asks us to move away from universal categories that tend to be Western-centric. For example, Roberto Strongman and Joseph Massad show in their works how international LGBT organizations operate from a Western understanding of sexuality to liberate "sexual minorities" in Latin America and the Middle East respectively.[69] Massad claims that the liberation discourse of the Gay International, as he names the discursive and missionary tasks represented by international LGBT organizations, was a deliberately planned colonizing project "to influence Arab concepts of sexual desire and practice."[70] Though I agree with the colonializing and imperialistic effects of the Gay International as delineated by Massad, I would

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[69] Strongman, Roberto. "Syncretic Religions and Dissident Sexualities" in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism,* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), and Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
[70] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 160.

argue that instead they are incorporated into and are the effects of a larger disciplining project of Western hegemonic forces. The Gay International may have the best intentions for what they see as "sexual minorities" in the respective geographical locations, but fall into the trap of not critically assessing their savior complex and thus imposing Western ideologies upon the "Other" (be it Middle Eastern or Latin American). My project seeks to extend their arguments, which are deeply embedded in cultural relativism, and depart from, and consequently challenge, the use of essentializing universal categories.

Nevertheless, cultural relativism is haunted by the danger of a defeatist standard of ethics as an epistemological claim that creates a moral impasse by claiming everything is acceptable within its own culture. From the void created by an evacuation of universal ethics, cultural relativists have made claims justifying violence such as honor killings: stoning of women on accusations of adultery or due to any contact with males outside of marriage.[71] As a result, cultural relativism dangerously leads to judgments that rationalize human rights violations as acceptable phenomena of another culture. I do not intend to claim that we should ignore human rights violations as acceptable culture specific phenomena or conversely that we should entirely disregard cultural traditions. Instead, what I am advocating is a strategic use of cultural relativism in which one is able to recognize and respect difference as a way for efficient and productive social activism. Conscious of the benefits of a strategic use of cultural relativism, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod explores Western attempts at liberating Afghani women from the "oppressive"

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[71] In 2008, a woman was killed in Saudi Arabia by her father for chatting with a man on Facebook. (See McElroy, Damien, "Saudi woman killed for chatting on Facebook," *The Telegraph*, March 31, 2008, accessed, February 21, 2013, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1583420/Saudi-woman-killed-for-chatting-on-Facebook.html). And in 2010 a Turkish girl was buried alive for befriending boys in in Southeast Turkey (See Tait, Robert, "Turkish girl, 16, buried alive 'for talking to boys,'" *The Guardian,* February 4, 2010, accessed February 21, 2013, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/feb/04/girl-buried-alive-turkey). These acts, though products of specific patriarchal systems, cannot and should not be excused through cultural relativism. It also cannot be ignored that the report of cases like this is what media theorists call "catastrophe coverage" or a sole focus on disasters for the coverage of a specific region.

Taliban. In her study, she reminds us there are different culture-specific ideas about justice and conceptions of rights. These ideas and conceptions in turn lead to different futurities than what we are indoctrinated to envision as best, such as those of the natural(ized) Western subject position.[72]

"They Hold the Keys of Cairo": *Bawabs***, Family and Morality**

Two weeks before my sexual experience with Ahmed, I went with him and his friends to what they described as a "gay party." Waiting for further details about the party, I sat in my apartment attempting to plan the lesson plan for tomorrow's class—while wondering what an Egyptian "gay party" would be like. Would it resemble "gay" clubs in the United States? Would there be men and women? Would there be alcohol or drugs? I received a text message from Ahmed that read: "meet at the McDonald's in Mohandesseen, Shehab St. at 10:00pm" I quickly got ready, hailed a cab and made my way to our rendezvous. Driving from the local neighborhood of Imbaba where I lived to Mohandesseen was always a complete shift in scenery.[73] Mohandesseen is an up-scale neighborhood in Giza (the west side of Cairo) and its name literally means "the engineers." It was originally intended as a discounted living area for engineers and, today, is one of the most expensive neighborhoods in downtown Cairo. The cab drove down the main street of the neighborhood, *Game'et el Duwal el-Arabiya* [The League of Arab States], past all of the heavily populated shopping areas illuminated by the large commercial signs of international franchises such as Starbucks, Costa Coffee, KFC, Pizza Hut, etc.—another signifier of Cairo's cosmopolitanism and vibrant proximity to the circuits of consumer-oriented globalization. After

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[72] Abu-Lughod, Lila, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Other," *American Anthropologist*: 104:3 (2002), 783-790.

[73] Imbaba is a neighborhood on the West bank of the Nile. It is considered to be a *sha'bi* or local neighborhood. It is not a common place for foreigners to live, and most people when I mentioned that I lived in Imbaba would remark that I was becoming a local.

an hour-long ride through the suffocating Cairo traffic, I arrived at the McDonald's on *Sharia Shehab* where Ahmed and his friends (Mahmoud, Mohammed, and Akram) were waiting for me. As we walked down the street, they started to provide me some details about the party. It was a birthday party for Mohammed's current boyfriend, Hamada, hosted by a mutual friend—an older man in his forties named Sharif.

We arrived at the building and waved past the unsuspecting *bawab*. Most buildings in Egypt have *bawabs*. They are usually from Upper Egypt (south Egypt) and tend to be from lower classes securely fixed at a social rank of rural migrant marginalized within a cosmopolitan and carnal social world. They leave their villages usually to take over the job of *bawab* from an older relative—a social reproduction with economic continuity. They live either on the roof or basement of the building in extreme squalor: on dirty mattresses, behind stairwells, etc.[74] *Bawabs* have been caricatured as dirty men missing teeth and their heads adorned with an Egyptian rural turban. However, they serve an important role in Egyptian culture and daily life for they are the keepers of morality. They tend to be religious conservatives. For example, the *bawab* of my building would play Qur'anic recordings throughout the day. *Bawabs* also regulate who goes in and out of the building—in effect, as rural and devout outsiders, they are positioned better than anyone to guard the vulnerable social order of the city, literally keeping out other "outsiders." If anything seems off or out of the ordinary (parties, co-ed couples, etc.) they are quick to contact landlords or the police.

What *bawabs* lack in social status they make up with informal power—a short-circuiting of the secular social order. Similarly to Hegel's master-slave dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, the *bawabs* eventually discover that, despite their social position as low-class economic

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[74] Stack, Megan "They Hold the Keys of Cairo," *Los Angeles Times,* October 24, 2005, accessed February 21 2013, http://articles.latimes.com/2005/oct/24/world/fg-doormen24.

slaves, that they control or regulate the tenants of the building—becoming their indirect masters from "below."[75] However, they also work as agents of the state due to their unofficial role as government informants. *Bawabs* are infamous for compiling and relaying information to governmental institutions and, in Mubarak's time, to the *Amn al-Dawla* or the secret police. Despite their role as enforcers of morality, I quickly found out that a good relationship with a *bawab* (read: monetary bribes) allows unconventional moral freedom for the tenants. A monetarily satisfied *bawab* means a happy tenant. Sharif, the host of the party I was about to attend, had bribed the *bawab* to ignore the large number of men entering the building that specific night.

Bawabs are only one node in the large informal networks of sociality and regulation. Along with serving the desires of the state, they are key enforcers of what anthropologist Diane Singerman describes as the *familial ethos,* or the moral philosophy that controls individual lives by setting parameters for behavior in the community.[76] The *familial ethos* in Cairo serves as an alternative model of political participation that is a product of a context of financial insecurity, traditions, religion (Islam), and political dynamics. It establishes the family as the center of power and authority and also as the central economic unit, displacing the heart of political participation from official institutions to informal networks. Thus, the *familial ethos* modulates this incorporation of the family/household into the public realm through a network of informal institutions such as marriage and *gam'iyyaat* (or community based savings, which are used to save up for large community expenses such as marriage).

The main goal and core principle of the *familial ethos* is the reproduction of the family and maintenance or improvement of its social status. As a result it establishes the parameters that

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[75] Hegel, GWF, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[76] Singerman, Diane, *Avenues of Participation: Family, Politics, and Networks in Urban Quarters of Cairo*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 43-44.

monitor daily lived experiences such as gender relations and the proper protocol for marriage. In this chief aspect of the *familial ethos*, the intersection between the personal and the public is most clearly visible by directly transposing sexual relationships into the public realm.[77] However, at the same time, the *familial ethos*, along with the realm of the family, disrupts the traditional binary of public and private, which binds women to the private realm or the household. In Egypt, the family/household is far from being just the domain of women, but instead serves as a locus of power and subversion. Inside the household, one temporarily escapes the all-seeing eye of the community and the state. For example, members of different sexes are allowed to interact without as many restrictions, men and women are also able to engage in same-sex practices, etc. The power of the realm of the family lies in its circumvention and transgression of social boundaries as long as one abides by the *familial ethos*.

It is this set of values that revolves around the importance of the family unit, along with the formal and informal institutions that regulate them, what can be seen as producer of a different conceptualization of sexuality. The importance given to reproducing family by the *familial ethos* permits the individual to transgress the limitations delineated by cultural taboos as long as s/he still fulfills the requirement of recreating the family. However, this does not mean that there are no consequences. In fact, it varies depending on the transgression and the individual. Sexual relationships between a man and a woman outside of marriage are heavily penalized by the law and the community (though the consequences tend to be easier for men). Same sex practices between men are looked down upon (especially for the one being penetrated), but are seen as viable ways for men to release sexual desires before marriage. Thus, the safety provided by the *familial*

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[77] Ibid., 44.

ethos for some subjects to transgress sexual and cultural norms continues to support a patriarchal system by not questioning the constructions of taboos and regulation of sexual behaviors.[78]

Desiring Difference: Gendering Sexuality and Stigma

Ahmed, his friends and I entered the building and ascended a couple flight of stairs. We stopped in front of an ornate wooden door, and Mahmoud knocked. A few seconds later, the door opened and Sharif, a large bald man in his 40's, appeared along with the energetic sounds and auto-tuned voice of *sha'abi* [local] female singer Bosy and her hit *Ah Ya Donia* [Oh The World].[79] Sharif welcomed us and led us into his apartment. At first, due to the extreme sensory stimulation (large amounts of smoke, loud music, and conversations) I was completely disoriented. In the midst of my hallucinatory daze, Ahmed and his friends introduced me (which seemed more like showing me off) to many men as the "foreign" friend. "You are the first foreigner to attend one of my parties" said the host Sharif in perfect English. Sharif, who had travelled to the United States multiple times on business trips that he did not elaborate upon, is an interesting representative of unconventional forms of life in Cairo/Egypt. Living alone (unmarried) is a highly non-normative lifestyle in Cairo. Traditionally, men and women live at home with their parents until marriage. As part of the traditional marriage protocol, men have to find a place for the married couple to move into after marriage—this is part of dower or the groom's pre-marriage expenses.[80] However, the cost of living in Egypt has increased throughout the years in contrast to the static 35 LE

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[78] Ibid., 46.

[79] *Sha'abi* music is an urban gritty music genre from Cairo. It is generally associated with urban lower classes due to its morally questionable content: sexual references and double entendre. *Sha'abi* music can also contain political messages. *Ah Ya Donia* was a single from the soundtrack of the 2012 Egyptian movie *El-Alemani* [The German]. This song would play everywhere, including the felucca boats on the Nile. Members of the higher class tend to describe this music as unintelligible and dirty.

[80] The monthly rent for the apartment in the local neighborhood in Imbaba that I stayed in during the summer was 3,000 LE. Though it is only 500 USD, for the average Egyptian it amounts the majority of the entire household's revenue. As a result, families of five or six live in small one bedroom apartment for that is all they can afford.

minimum wage set in 1984.[81] As a result, young men devote five to ten years to the process of capital accumulation for marriage with the help of their families and communities.[82] Therefore, Sharif's living accommodation was only possible due to his social position as a member of a higher economic class, and to his gender privilege because apartments are rarely rented to single women.

As Sharif showed me around the apartment, my pupils dilated, allowing me to situate myself in the apartment. I sat down on a black leather couch in-between Ahmed and Mahmoud. Sharif's apartment was nicer than most I had visited. There were different contemporary paintings on the wall along with a variety of accessories atop a fine wooden cabinet. The living and the dining rooms were connected and all of the furniture was pushed towards the walls allowing for more space. In the opposite side of the room was a large L shaped couch where many "masculine" looking men were sitting. These were the "tops" or so I was told. Most of them were extremely muscular, signs of extreme dedication to their body image and/or in some cases the use of steroids.[83] They attempted to embody the Egyptian ideal of masculinity exemplified by the ubiquitous Egyptian *el-geel*[84] singer, Amr Diab.[85] These men flaunted their "masculinity" by wearing absurdly tight t-shirts that delineated their musculature. There were about ten of these men, most of them in their twenties, lounging and smoking hashish and hookah while gazing at the "feminine" men who were belly dancing for them. Some of the men belly dancing had tied

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[81] McGrath, Cam, "EGYPT: Minimum Wage Not Enough," *Inter Press Service,* February 4, 2010, accessed February 21, 2013, http://www.ipsnews.net/2010/02/egypt-minimum-wage-not-enough/.

[82] Singerman, *Avenues of Participation*, 122.

[83] I witnessed multiple exchanges of steroids and other muscle enhancing drugs. Mohammed Afify worked as a personal trainer and thus had access to such drugs. He would hand them out to his friends at the *qahwas* and would constantly encourage me to work out in order to appear manlier.

[84] *El-geel* is a musical genre that first emerged in the 1970s as an alternative *sha'abi. El-Geel* is considered to be dance-pop and it mixes elements from Western pop, reggae and Arabic music.

[85] Amr Diab recently changed his public image. During his debut as an artist with his hit *Nour al-Ain*, he had an average build body and greasy combed back hair. Today, Amr Diab (even though he is 50) is extremely "jacked up." He is also entirely hairless (even though Egyptians tend to be hairy) a trend that was seen also seen in the men at the party. Ahmed was actually hairy and showed it off as emblematic of his (traditional) masculinity in comparison to the shaved men. Amr Diab even has a fitness blog on his website www.amrdiab.net.

their shirts up as a way of accentuating their abdominal movements. They would shake and vibrate their bodies to the rhythm of the music in ways I did not think possible. Their physical skills were impressive, but nevertheless these men were thinner and less muscular than the "tops." One of Ahmed's friends, Mado, stood up to join the men dancing. He was more skilled than the rest, and gradually everyone else stopped dancing and joined the gazing crowd.

This division between men was evident in the way that each man performed their "gender"—they established a (gendered) difference through their gestures, behaviors and dress (drag) between tops/penetrators and bottoms/penetrated. Thus, in this instance, desire became coded into gender performance as each man tried to attract what he desired. Identities and desire became intertwined. In order to participate in this game of pleasure and desire, one had to submit to these gendered rules. Not many strayed away from this performative dichotomy, foreclosing opportunities for versatility and flexibility in sexual roles. These performances of desires, however, were only allowed within the confines of the private sphere—the realm controlled by the *familial ethos*. In such cases, the doorframe becomes the border that separates a distinct set of guidelines that regulate sexual behavior and allows for the transgression of public norms "safely."

The constitutive relation between tops and bottoms is similar to the gender construction of the *travesti* or Brazilian transgendered prostitutes. Don Kulick explores the self-constitutive relationships between travesti and their boyfriends, which is based on demarcated differences.[86] With their understanding of gender, *travesti* are able to construct for themselves a third gender category that is neither male nor female. Their relationships with their boyfriends, the "manly men" of their society, from which the *travesti* do not derive any bodily pleasure serve as the constitutive basis of their gender. The "male" boyfriends who show no interest in the *travesti*'s

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[86] Kulick, Don, *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 125.

male biology provide a gendered anchor by embodying the masculinity necessary for the *travesti's* gendered construction as a feminized man. If a boyfriend slipped and showed interest in the *travesti*'s penis or asked to be penetrated, he relinquished their status as a man and would become a *viado* or a homosexual. Thus, the *travesti* can no longer constitute themselves against the maleness of his/her boyfriend since they would then both share sexuality and location in the gendered network of power.[87] The performative and relational constitution of the gendered differences exposes the socially constructed nature of gender. They point towards the social fabrication of gender that is naturalized as an essential identity.[88] In the Egyptian socio-political network of power relations, the dichotomy of bottom and top override those between gay and straight. Thus, same-sex sexuality in Egypt is based on sexual practices and not on an understanding of sexuality as a core fragment of an individual's social identity further exposing the relational characteristic of gender (and sexuality).

Therefore, sexual encounters between men in Egypt do not resemble the idealized homosexual partnership that constitutes homosexuality in the West. Due to the semi-rigid structure of gendered differences, sexual reciprocity is virtually non-existent. During the sexual exchange described in the opening, Ahmed never showed interest in my body parts that signified "maleness" (read penis). Throughout the entire exchange, it was all about him. I felt abused and exploited, as if I was only there to fulfill his pleasures and desires. Based on my understanding of Western homosexual relationships, I was angered by his lack of reciprocity. I had conformed to the stigma associated with the passive role; its association with shame and femininity. However, through many different sexual encounters, I realized the pleasure that can be derived from passivity. The sexual encounter with Ahmed to this date remains one of my most pleasure-filled sexual

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[87] Kulick, *Travesti*, 124.
[88] Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 185.

engagement. Through that encounter, I realized my own phallocentric obsession in sexuality. I came to understand how the entire body can serve as a sexual organ—a multimodal map of pleasure and ecstasy.

As Mado danced, he continuously signaled me to join him. Mahmoud and Mohammed smilingly encouraged me, "Come on Fernando! Show us how you dance in America!" However, I was intimidated by Mado's dancing. There was no way that I could dance like that. I would only be giving these men an opportunity to laugh at me. Mado approached me and grabbed my hand to pull me up from the couch to the "dance floor." As Mado tugged at my arm, Akram whispered into my ear asking me not to dance. I rejected Mado's invitation relieved at not embarrassing myself by dancing and asked Akram why I should not dance. He sternly responded, "Only the feminine men dance." He was referring to the "bottoms" or the subjects who are anally penetrated during intercourse. This type of disdain towards the bottoms was ubiquitous. The stigma against this form of gender performance was clear and obvious. The "masculine" tops refrained from any public interaction with the "bottoms," as a way of asserting their masculinity and performing heterosexuality. At the *qahwas* where these men gathered, the tops sat at one table and the bottoms at the other. Only "masculine" acting bottoms were allowed to sit with the tops—Mado was one of these exceptions for he performed a socially accepted form of masculinity.

This division between tops and bottoms and the stigma associated with passive role during homosexual intercourse is not limited to Egypt or the Middle East. In an interview, Foucault argues that "most homosexuals feel that the passive role is in some way demeaning."[89] He claims that this

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[89] Foucault, Michel, "Sexual Choice, Sexual Act: An Interview with Michel Foucault." *Salmagundi:* 58/59 (1983), 21.

is due to the relations of power between men and women and the association of women as the penetrated subject. "[Most men] think that the idea of their submitting to another man, of being under another man in the act of love would destroy their image in the eyes of women."[90] However, Foucault is basing his analysis on Western conceptualizations of sexuality where any form of sexual perversity is stigmatized. In Egypt, the main stigmatized subject in a (homo)sexual encounter is the passive/bottom. Similarly, Roger Lancaster discusses how the passive man, or *cochón*, during same sex male practices in Nicaragua is the only one being stigmatized. *Cochónes* are feminized men, whose stigma stems from the concept of the passive subject as the object that is used by the active subject.[91] The word *cochón* is thought to have stemmed from the Spanish word *colchon* or mattress representing the *cochón*'s role as the passive and used subject. *Cochónes* are ridiculed and harassed, but the level of harassment depends on their discreetness. A discreet *cochón*—one who dresses "masculine" and keeps his affairs secret—is rarely the object of public harassment.[92] In these cases, what marks a subject with shame and disgrace is not same-sex desire, but the transgression of socially accepted masculinity.

Similarly to the stigma associated to the Nicaraguan subject position of *cochón*, Egyptian men deploy the term ladyboy to mark a man who is used like a woman by another man. These are the men who, according to the rules of desire, embody feminine characteristics, to a certain extent, such as long hair and smaller bodies. They are sometimes referred to with female pronouns by the rest of the group. For example, Islam, a rather feminine-read man, was often ridiculed by being called Selma (a play on the Arabic root of his name س- ل -م). Islam/Selma was extremely thin and usually wore really tight clothing. He was "dating" the only Christian man in the group with whom

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[90] Ibid.

[91] Lancaster, Roger, *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 242.

[92] Ibid.

I spent most of my time. He was also conscious of his identity as a ladyboy, and would in fact embrace it. On one occasion, he bought new underwear on the street and showed off his thong to a group in the *qahwa,* commenting on how great his ass would look—attempting to attract attention. He also felt threatened by my presence, and therefore picked on my imperfect Arabic. Islam/Selma would only speak to me in Egyptian Arabic as a way to further ridicule me and emphasize my outsider status as someone who did not understand. I would ask Akram to translate and he would just dismiss Islam/Selma as a hysterical and irrational (wo)man driven by jealousy. In the eyes of the men in the group, he was simultaneously an object of reproach and desire due to his feminine characteristics.

Some of these ladyboys fully embodied femininity or the set of behaviors, and gestures society associates with women (small build, flowing hair, little or no body hair, etc.) in the private sphere through transvestism. A few weeks later in a different party, I had my first encounter with an Egyptian transvestite. It was a private party held in 6th October City, an affluent suburb of Cairo. We drove an hour outside of Cairo at one in the morning, and parked in front of this beautiful brand new building. I was instructed that we had to go up in threes and to be completely silent as to not disturb the neighbors. When I arrived at the top floor (the 6th), all I saw was a red light emanating below the door. I was scared and intrigued at the same time. At the door was a tall feminine figure lounging against the wall. He introduced himself as Khukha (a female version of the Arabic word for peach). Khukha invited me in and offered me a drink, which at first I thought was a glassful of vodka becasue he poured it out of a bottle of Grey Goose. It ended up being just water, but it was not the only thing throughout this entire night that was not what it seemed to be. In the back of the apartment was a room, and there was a woman. I was amazed. In all of our encounters there had never been a woman present.

After the entire group reunited in the apartment, the woman in the back came out to introduce herself. Fayza was a transvestite. Her large frame (she was taller than everyone in the room) and deep voice signaled her male biology. Most of the men in the room were obsessed with her presence and would not stop talking about her. Akram mentioned to me how Ahmed, who could not attend the party because of work, would be disappointed to hear that there was a "true" ladyboy at the party. Ahmed was infamous for pursuing transvestites. Throughout the entire party, Fayza was treated as an object. She would serve drinks and entertain the guests. She was also the ridicule of the party and her masculine characteristics were the focus of derision. Even though transvestism adds to the stigmatization of ladyboys, they were often desired the most by the "tops" due to the power of self-constitution they provide them. For example, at a subsequent party, which I was not able to attend, there were transvestites from Saudi Arabia and their presence was the central topic of conversation for the following days. Transvestites or "true" ladyboys allow for the "top" to feel more masculine, almost as if he were having sex with a woman—the true Egyptian homosexual difference in which both subjects are in fact completely hetero-gendered or differently gendered.

What always amused me through all of these categorizations and divisions was the ideal masculinity that these men were using as a reference point for manliness. They would always play question games at the *qahwa* and one of the most common challenges was to go around the room and name the most "masculine"-acting and - looking man in the group. What they would look for was the "obvious" physical characteristic and marker of masculinity: muscles. However, the performance of this masculinity is quite different from what we understand as masculinity in the United States. This difference in "male" gender performance points towards the culture specific natural(ized) understanding of masculinity. The main difference is in the way in which homosocial

interactions are regulated. Since homosexuality is not a commonly acknowledged issue, it is not considered to be as much of threat to Egyptian masculinity. The acceptable homosociality allows for physical contact between men such as holding hands or locking arms while walking, or two men sleeping in the same bed. Actions such as these would mark as man in the West as having homosexual tendencies. Instead, in Egypt, they are seen as common aspects of normative homosocial relationships.

This party was my first introduction to what Ahmed and his friends called the "society," a community of men who have sex with other men. Though most of these men do not speak English, they used the English word "society" to describe this specific group of men. However, not everyone associates or affiliates themselves with the "society." As I will explore later in this chapter, there are some men that entirely reject the "society" because they do not see their same-sex practices as a portion of their social identity. Nevertheless, it was uncommon for this group of men to use Arabic words when discussing same-sex practices. As put by Akram, "Arabic is the language of the Qur'an and therefore is not appropriate for the discussion of such topics." This statement implies that same-sex practices are not *halal* or allowed by Islam. The Arabic language also lacks words that correspond with the English words of gay, homosexuality, heterosexuality, gender and sexuality.

As a result of interactions with Western discourses through globalization, new Arabic words were invented in the 1950's to correspond with the English words for gender and sexuality. The word *jins*, which traditionally means type, kind and ethnolinguistic origin, for example, has recently acquired the additional meaning of biological sex and national origin.[93] Similarly, there were no Arabic words for sexuality or types of sexuality (homosexuality and heterosexuality). As

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[93] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 171.

a result of the translation of works by Foucault and Freud, words for sexuality (*jinsaniyah*), heterosexuality (*ghayriyah* or differentness) and homosexuality (*mithliyah* or sameness) were created. However, most of these words are only used by scholars and rarely used by everyday Egyptians.[94] The most commonly used Arabic word for homosexuality in academic scholarship and popular media is *al-shudhudh al-jinsi* or sexual deviance. In contrast, the slang (and often derogatory) term *khawal*, which is derived from medieval times meaning a feminine male entertainer that impersonated the *ghawazi* or female dancers, is often used in the Egyptian dialect.

It is obvious that by simply "not having a language" to denote an act or identity does not foreclose the action or active identity. Just because there are no native words that compare to the English equivalent of these terms does not mean that same-sex practices have not existed in the Middle East prior to Western influences. Instead, the lack of Arabic words points towards a different conceptualization of same-sex practices that is embedded in history and cultural values which this part of the chapter has attempted to analyze and conceptualize. Male same-sex practices have existed historically throughout the Arab world and have been possible due to the cultural values established by the *familial ethos*. This non-identity is the traditional understanding of same-sex sexuality in Egypt, but as a result of globalization and interactions with other cultures, new subjectivities have been produced. Some of these new subject positions dangerously flirt with the hegemonic powers of Western influence, while others arise from a nuanced inscription of the sexual body that allows for fluctuation with the goal of surviving the disciplining forces of sexuality and its categories.

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[94] Ibid., 172.

Identity is a Gamble: Collision of Identities, Ideologies and Risks

As Ahmed, Mahmoud and I sat on the black leather couch, Hossam (a friend of the host) approached us asking us if we wanted a drink: rum, vodka, or a plain soda. I requested a rum and coke, while Ahmed politely refused any alcoholic drinks settling for an unadulterated Sprite. While Hossam prepared our drinks, Ahmed tells me that drinking is bad for it is forbidden in Islam and that I should not do it. "Isn't homosexuality also deemed *haram* in Islam?" I replied. "It's different," he responds, while refusing to expand on his rationale.[95] After returning with our drinks, Hossam invites us to play a game with the rest of the group. These word games similar to the US game "never have I ever" are the main source of entertainment for this group of men. In every social encounter whether at *qahwas* or parties, multiple rounds of these games would be performed. There were two types of games. The first consisted of a question being asked to the group, and in a roulette-like fashion everyone would go around answering the same question "truthfully." In the second form of the game, a question master who would go around asking each individual their own unique true or false question usually with the goal of stirring up drama and spectacles. The most common themes involved sexual actions, relationships, and desire.

Akram, known within the group as the game master due to his provocative questions, begins the first round by asking the group to go around and pointing out a person in the room they would like to have sex with. In order to make the game more exciting (or so he said), he asked me to start the cycle of answers. I looked around the room, not knowing who to pick. I hesitated to pick someone I knew due to the effects it would have on the relationships I had with the group. I

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[95] The relationship between Islam and homosexuality is beyond the scope of this project. Though it occupied the thoughts of many of the men that I interacted with, it is a complex issue that cannot be analyzed thoroughly in this project. I have explored this intricate intersection of religion and sexuality in an article titled "Queer Ijtihad: Queer Muslim Intersectionality and a Close Reading of Islamic Texts" published in Duke University's undergraduate journal *Juhood: Journal of Middle Eastern and North African Affairs.*

settled by picking Kaboo, a green-eyed light skinned Egyptian from a village outside of Cairo that was the group's common object of desire.[96] Little did I know that during his turn, Kaboo would also pick me as the person he would like to have sex with (and would eventually lead to sexual exchanges). The second round consisted of Hossam reading everyone's gender and sexual identity. He would try to guess who they truly desired based on what he knew of the individual and then ask if his guess was *sahh au ghalat* [true or false].

His first victim in this game of identity roulette was Ahmed. As Hossam deliberated upon his guess, I started to formulate my own guess creating my own individual derivative bet— bringing a parlor game into the space of ethnographic contemplation. How does Ahmed identify? Ahmed was one of the men in the group that I knew well particularly due to his interest in me. Throughout the entire party he had been extremely protective of me and would not let any other man approach me. I had my guesses regarding his sexuality, but was not completely confident in my assumptions. After a few seconds, Hossam came to a conclusion and stated derisively "let me guess Ahmed, you are straight." The whole room burst out in laughter, while Ahmed proudly asserted his identity as straight. All of the men in the room that were deeply enmeshed in the global power networks and international discourses of sexuality were amused by Ahmed's self-identification. This round/spin of the identity roulette served as a public policing and regulation of sexual identities and desire—it laid out through its inherent risk a map of sexual desire, practices and identities.

Ahmed thus embodied the Egyptian traditional sexual subjectivity shaped by the values of the *familial ethos* described throughout the chapter. He rejected the interpellation from Western

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[96] I mention the lightness of his skin and the color of his eyes for these were the two attributes that made him desirable by the group exposing the racist pigmentocracy that also permeated through social and sexual relationships in the group.

forces and influences as a "gay" subject and along with it the "society" that was constructed as a result. His subject position, despite being the focus of ridicule from the global modern Egyptian subject, allowed him a sexual freedom not allowed to homosexual subjects in the West or those interpellated by it. As a result of his self-understanding as straight or a normative sexuality, Ahmed could claim everyone (any gender) as his object of desire. He avoids the self-shattering identity crisis that haunts the Western homosexual identity, and instead can uphold traditional values and reproduce the idealized Egyptian family.

The game of identity roulette spun again. It was time for Akram to unveil his sexuality. Without hesitation, Hossam guessed "gay." Akram was one of the many men that willingly took up the Western "gay" identity. In Akram's own words: "My penis will never enter a vagina." He is one of the subjects that Massad's Gay International seeks to liberate from the allegedly "oppressive" Arab-Muslim regimes. Akram rejects the Egyptian traditional subjectivity represented by Ahmed and is then understood as a failed product of the Egyptian *familial ethos*. The subjectivity he inhabits is understood as betraying his own culture transforming him into the Egyptian Malinche[97] or the dreaded native informant. Consequently, he is punished severely by his society construed as an outsider and simultaneously bounded to live in the transposed limiting Western closet. His biggest fear is his family finding out about his sexuality and rejecting him. As a result, the subjectivity that Akram represents is constantly flirting with Western powers seeking validation from its oppressive hegemony, which seeks to liberate it but not without its own self-interest in mind. This subject position occupies a dangerous position, leaving the subject that

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[97] La Malinche was a Nahua woman from the Mexican Gulf Coast, who facilitated the Spanish Conquest of Mexico by helping Hernan Cortez as his translator, guide and lover. The figure of La Malinche is commonly deployed in Latin American literature to exemplify the native informant that betrays his/her culture under promises of success and recognition by the colonial forces. She is the symbol of violation (historical and bodily) representing the "Indian women who were fascinated, violated, or seduced by the Spaniards." Paz, Octavio. "The Sons of La Malinche," in *The Labyrinth of Solitude: And, the Other Mexico; Return to the Labyrinth of Solitude; Mexico and the United States; The Philanthropic Ogre,* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 86.

inhabits it exposed to the scrutiny of both local and global forces, never being authentic or progressive enough to satisfy their desires exposing the hegemonic suffocation from both poles.

The last spin of the identity roulette landed on Mahmoud. Everyone in the room knew Mahmoud pretty well, and knew the difficulty of attempting to categorize him. Mahmoud was infamous for his different uses of sexual terminology depending on the context and situation. It all depends on who he interacting with and the goal of such interaction. I have seen him identify as bisexual, straight or in some cases refusing to invoke any category. Hossam guesses "bisexual," which is terms regularly used to describe the traditional Egyptian sexuality allowed by the *familial ethos*. However, Mahmoud's deployment of sexuality differs from both previous conceptualizations since he is constantly negotiating between an essentialized understanding of identity as a fixed identity and a product of social codes. Instead, his subjectivity resembles what Jose Esteban Muñoz terms "disidentification" or a "third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it."[98] Unlike, Ahmed who rejects the hegemonic Western "gay" identity and Akram who embraces it, Mahmoud avoids becoming, in Althusser's terms a "good" or "bad" subject to global and local forces. Instead, he reassembles and reconfigures both inscripting forces and understandings of sexuality by engaging in a disidentificatory process to maneuver the geopolitical terrain demarcated by interactions of globalization in a cosmopolitan city to satisfy bodily desires and to ensure his "survival" for both local and global sexualities lead to their own consequences.

Though I attempt to make clear delineations between these three different types of subjectivities by using the three above subjects as their representatives, it is clear that they all flow from one to the other leaving traces from body to body. Even my descriptions and analyses of each

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[98] Muñoz, Jose Esteban, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

of these subjectivities are permeated with relations and comparisons to each other. They are not monolithic and independent categories, but instead are cross-cut by characteristics and aspects of each other; after all gender and sexuality are always relational. Each subject position is involved in its own risks, which vary significantly depending on outside factors such as class, skin pigment, gender performance, etc. It is complicated to delineate and dissect power dynamics; instead it is important to realize that it is always a gamble of power. Now, that the identity roulette has stopped its circulation, I want to spin it again to show how each of these positions (be it sexuality, identity, self-understandings, etc.) are unstable in different degrees, and how in the schema of sexuality each represents their own level of risk or resistance.

The traditional Egyptian position represented by Ahmed runs the risk of being dismissed as a product of a patriarchal and barbaric society that oppresses feminized men as solely objects of male desire and women as objects of reproduction of not only society's offspring, but of the cultural values of the *familial ethos*. This subjectivity risks becoming constructed by Western forces as an extreme manifestation of patriarchy similar to the deployment of *machista* discourses regarding Latin America to occlude the patriarchal processes in the West. However, a complete adherence to the traditional Egyptian position of sexuality binds its subjects into a static and stagnant position with no room for change or sexual versatility. Even though it allows for a plurality of pleasures (for specific subjects) it limits them to specific social status. In this identity gamble of sexualities in Cairo, this traditional subjectivity serves as a safe bet by adhering to traditional cultural and familial values.

The in-between subject position created by the Western interpellation of the "gay subject" functions as a Queer *Jihad* or struggle looking to inscribe itself within a new reality. It is deeply embedded in a discourse of change seeking a utopia by challenging established and naturalized

understandings of sexuality. However, it risks completely incorporating Western hegemonic discourses that establish the East as a primitive and barbaric space. It also forecloses opportunities for the East to develop itself as a modern space outside of the teleological paradigm of development established by the West. Instead, it forces Eastern subjects to view themselves and their cultures as traditional and backwards and needing of reform and transformation. While it offers a way out of "dreaded East" as defined by the West, in its local manifestation it become a dangerous position for it requires its subjects to "come out" as a sexual minority establishing themselves as the prime target for state control as seen in the 2001 raid of the Queen Boat, a "gay" nightclub on the Nile. As Joseph Massad shows in his controversial work *Desiring Arabs*, the infiltration of Western forces into the local matrix by interpellating "gay subjects" is what the Egyptian state fears and regulates instead of same-sex practices as a Western perspective leads an outsider to believe.[99]

Unlike these two subject position that independently revolt against either local or global forces, the third option or *disidentification* offers the most opportunities and possibilities since it works on and against both ideologies simultaneously. It is this intermediate position that makes disidentification a strategic form of survival in this complex matrix of power relations. Disidentification allows the Egyptian subject to recreate himself vis-à-vis the East and the West constructing him as an autonomous subject that is neither bound to traditional values nor passively waiting for liberation from the West. Instead, the disidentificatory subject reworks himself within the flux of power and discourse by dissecting the black box that essentialized and naturalized power. This resistance aspect of disidentification is only possible due to the Foucauldian theory of polyvalent discourses, specifically the role of reverse discourse as a strategy of resistance.[100]

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[99] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, 183.
[100] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 19, and Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 101.

Disidentification, thus, paves the way for a different fluid-like interaction with power that creates a new subjectivization of the Eastern man that engages in same-sex practices. However, due to the intermediary and referential aspect of disidentification it also renders the disidentificatory subject vulnerable to multiple forms of disciplining and regulation for his subject position can potentially be misread and misconstrued by both local and global forces.

Conclusion: What's the Risk?

Each of these subjectivities provides a variety of different ways of interacting with the complex network of power in which we are all embedded. They represent the attempts of many of surviving in a world that punishes difference and *queerness* and as explored, each of these subjectivities come with their own individual conceptual and discursive risks. However, the risk and consequences are not only theoretical, but the lived experiences of many. Due to the inherent violence of this identity gamble of pleasure and desire, this game of roulette can transform at any moment into its messy and potentially terminal counterpart: Russian roulette. Every spin becomes a gamble between life and death. There are violent consequences when entering this casino of power, identity and desire. But who owns the house in which these subjects playing? The following chapter seeks to demonstrate how the house edge or advantage is constructed through global networks of power by exploring the consolidations and manifestation of these forces in online or (cyber)spaces. It instils a warning of caution; things might not be exactly what they seem, and in order to leave unscathed (if there is even an escape) one must resort to creative methods of resistance to hegemonic and dominant forces that regulate queerness.

Chapter 3:

Cybercultures, Online-Arab-Queers, and Interface Hackers:
Locating Individuals, Identities, and Ideas in Cyberspaces

"What do you think about him?" asked Mahmoud as he passed his phone around the group. Akram, Mohammed and Ahmed all replied with enthusiasm, encouraging him to "go for it" as the phone circulated around the group in a *qahwa* in Mohandeseen, Ahmed handed me the phone and on the screen was an internet profile from a website called *Manjam.com*. The user *shikoo* lives in Alexandria, is 26 years old, identifies as gay, HIV-, and bottom only. His pictures showed him wearing a tight green shirt taking a picture in front of a mirror with his cellphone. "What about him?" said Mahmoud after I had return him his phone. The second profile was *magic51,* a 19-year-old also living in Alexandria. The picture showed a half-naked man in extremely tight black and white briefs. The description underneath it read: انا سالب بنوتي مش مشعر و البس قميص نوم و شراب حريم [I am a feminine bottom, not hairy and I wear a night shirt and panty hose]. I did not know what to say, and Mahmoud noticed my confusion, "I am trying to set up my schedule for our time in Alexandria next week." He was asking me to rate the attractiveness of the men he was planning on sleeping with during our trip to Alexandria the following week.

Mahmoud approached me and showed me the website beginning with his profile: jamguy. The profile was composed of three main parts: pictures, two free response sections (myprofile and mydesire), and a list of responses from a drop down menu. The main picture on his profile was of his bare back as he flexed his muscles. According to his profile, Mahmoud was 24 years old, athletic, bisexual, Muslim, top only and with an extra-large "endowment." Mahmoud explained to me how due to the exclusionary nature of the "society," it was difficult to meet new people and had become rather incestuous. As a result, Manjam.com serves the "society" as a prosthetic

extension of their lived reality. It allows the opportunity for all types of men who desire to have sex with other men to become part of the "society" and participate in the circulation of pleasure. Mahmoud continued to show me the different men that he had met online, and the "status" of their relationship.

After I left Egypt, I created a profile on Manjam.com as a way of staying in touch with the group. Thus, for this last portion of this project, I have logged (and literally written myself) into one of the many online dating/sex cruising websites that expands the boundaries of the material world for queer Egyptian men. My main object of study concerns the social interactions mediated through the website Manjam.com which is self-described as "a gay social network for dating, work and travel," and how information is produced, coded, translated, and transformed in this specific cyberspace.[101] As I participated in this online world, I explored how the Identity Roulette became transposed online and the role played by technology as accomplice to global imperialist forces— advancing the colonialist project of the Gay International by imposing Western identities, ideas, and concepts on "otherized" communities. I also discovered how these men inscribe themselves into the virtual utilize the tools of the technological system to resist the limiting structure of the website.

Cyberspaces: Transposing Sex and Bodies Online

The cyberspace or virtual world of Manjam.com is a crucial platform for the establishment of networks amongst young men who have sex with other men in Cairo, but how does one perform an ethnography in an online space? The main challenge of the anthropology of cyberspaces is the definition of its object. Cyberspaces breed their own community and practices that emerge within

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[101] *Manjam.com—Gay Social Network & Gay Dating*, HubJet, 2008, Web.

the virtual or "networked" space—the cyberspace—sustained by the use of modern technology, mainly the internet. These spaces are diverse and take different forms: blogs, social networks, cybersex, e-commerce, games, chats, etc. All of these forms, however, rely on the foundational aspect of the internet—a perpetual exchange of data packets across a network of networks created by conglomerate of devices (computers, cellphones, etc), which serve as end points. Cyberspaces only exist in between these endpoints; they are constructed of interactions of data transferred between them. They are the virtual manifestation of networks and relations—places of connection and links. Cyberspaces are where active creation and translation occurs, usually simultaneously and goal-oriented. Just as cyberspaces exist at the space in between, they also stem from a specific social reality. Thus, cyberspaces are the gridding and programming of a network of interactions in accordance with contextual and situational power relations.[102] As a result, there are no singular cybercultures and cyberspaces. They are all interrelated and dependent. The online student-professor email based communications are closely related to the sexual relationships performed online through dating and sex cruising websites. My own relationship with cyberspaces has included throughout my life many professional exchanges with professors, alternate lives as characters in role playing games, a virtual representation of my graces and disgraces on Facebook, constant updates from family members and friends worldwide and anonymous sexual and emotional encounters with users across the globe.

When a person enters multiple-user environments online such as social networking sites (Facebook) or online dating sites (OkCupid, Manjam, etc), the first thing they must do is choose a (screen)name for their online representation. One does not already exist in cyberspace; one must write and perform one's self. Cyberspaces are romantically described as "semi-blank slate upon

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[102] Nelson, "Maya Hackers and the Cyberspatialized Nation-State: Modernity, Ethnostalgia, and a Lizard Queen in Guatemala," *Cultural Anthropology,* 11:3 (1996), 296.

which users write" their identities and selves.[103] They are perceived as a blank web page where there are no rules or boundaries, where one can represent oneself as one desires. They are a "Global Stage" or an international theatre where one can transgress the bodily restrictions of identity—gender, race, and sexuality.[104] The internet has been acclaimed as the Great Equalizer, where one's body and identity seem to lack importance. Cyberspaces, theoretically, allow for individuals to transgress their bodily boundaries and play with their identities since it is a space constructed on anonymity, right? No one really knows who is at the other end of the chatroom.

In the book *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Allucquere Rosanne Stone presents and deconstructs the story of how a male psychologist, Sanford Lewis, created an online identity of a disabled woman named Julie Graham in a text-based chat room.[105] The two identities were completely different: Julie was a confirmed atheist, who drank, smoked pot, and was a passionate cyber-sexer. Sanford, on the other hand, was a conservative Jew, scared of drugs and alcohol, and a hopeless sexual klutz.[106] Under the screen name of Julie, Sanford developed intimate relationships with other women in a chat room of CompuServe. Some of the encounters were also of a sexual nature including (cyber)sex. Emotions, feelings and (figurative) sexual fluids became transposed into textual script and transgressed the spatial distance between the different online users. However, Julie's identity was gradually breached, for the male and able body of the psychologist would unintentionally enter into the chat rooms establishing a transgendered virtual embodiment that is the norm of cyberspaces.[107] Eventually, "true" disabled

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[103] Kolko, Beth, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert Rodman, "An Introduction" in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert Rodman, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

[104] Rodriguez, Juana Maria, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*, (New York: New York University Press), 128.

[105] Stone, Alluquere Rosanne, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age,* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1995). 66-81.

[106] Ibid., 77.

[107] Ibid., 180-181.

women began to challenge the identity of Julie Graham and the psychologist's "true" identity was revealed. Many of the women he had interacted with claimed to have suffered from rape-like experiences due to the "deception" they had undergone.[108]

The internet and its related (cyber)spaces allows us to construct a virtual representation of oneself that can drastically differ from one's lived reality. These representations bring into question what is real and what is not. For the women who shared emotional experiences with Julie, she was real (even though she might have lacked a physical body). Virtual identities exist in the in between planes of cyberspaces, and just like the spaces they inhabit, they become real at the point of interaction, at the link between two or more points. The possibility of creating *authentic* and *real* identities in cyberspaces leads us to believe that we are able to leave our bodies behind in the "real" world, that our "real" embodied identity can be entirely rewritten online. However, the body never really disappears in cyberspaces. It is always present there. It is exchanged, rewritten, redesigned, becoming a "discursive fetish."[109] Juana Maria Rodriguez recounts a virtual encounter in which she is "passing as a man, owning a dick" and engaging in cyber-sex (a textual exchange of bodies) with Gloria—a female gendered virtual subject. As they engage in cyber-foreplay, Rodriguez types, "*estoy tan mojado pensando en tu hoyo* [I am so wet thinking about your hole]."[110] At this moment, her gendered body (or at least gendered fluids) poured out onto the screen. This slip of the tongue marks the limitations of the endless possibilities of representations in cyberspace. No matter how hard you try, you cannot escape your body.

One key aspect of cyberspaces is the creation of human-computer interfaces which are the points of interaction between humans (bodies) and technologies instead of the wires and circuits

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[108] Ibid., 78.
[109] Rodriguez, *Queer Latinidad*, 142.
[110] Ibid., 135.

themselves.[111] We, the users, meet technology at the interface. The interface regulates our interactions in cyberspace, and is responsible for setting up the structure and framework for the construction of our online experiences, our virtual realities and personas.[112] Like the myths and stories that construct our social realities and interactions, interfaces serve as the basic building blocks for an online lived reality that is based on a social matrix of power, while leaving few traces of how these embedded power relations affect our interactions and subjectivities. They function as the maps and guides of our communal imagined reality. However, like all maps, interfaces are important for what they do not depict or portray. Their power lies in how the terrain in which concepts, ideas, and our experiences and subjectivities are represented.[113] In this technological geography of human-computer-human interaction (HCHI), the design of technological interfaces forces users to adapt to the "construct of the machine."[114]

The anthropology of cybercultures raises interesting and productive questions regarding the relationships between humans and technology and technology's effects on "our" subjectivities. This only includes, of course, those who have access to these technologies. Theoretically, the internet is a democratic space accessible to all, but not everyone around the world has equal access to the internet. This so-called "digital divide" compounds the problems of access to resources of everyday life. While there has been an increase in racial and global diversity in internet use, the quality and forms of access differs. In Egypt, for example, having internet in your home is a luxury, but internet cafes and cell-phone mediated internet access is abundant. Even in the US, a large majority of minorities and lower-class individuals do not have internet access in their own homes.

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[111] Kolko, Beth, "Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face," in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura and Gilbert Rodman, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 213.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid., 219.
[114] Ibid., 220.

Some of my university colleagues had to go to public libraries to complete online college applications. However, the digital divide today reveals itself predominantly through the varying levels of internet speeds and access to specific cyberspaces that are regulated through monetary cost. Technology is commonly described as neither inherently good nor bad but such a perspective masks the networks of power within which the use and consumption of technology and the internet are situated.[115] As a result, it is important while performing an anthropology of cybercultures and cyberspaces to raise questions such as: what new forms of social reality are being created/constructed or how are already existing realities being modified through technological innovations? How are people's routine experiences affected by technologies? How do specific social locations (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.) affect one's interaction with cyberspaces? And finally, what new subjectivities are produced by the use of these technologies and how are these subjectivities along with those already existing regulated through HCHIs?

Interface: Regulating Queerness

Beth Kolko and Lisa Nakamura explore how the lived illusion of race becomes represented and experienced in specific cyberspaces where race or specific racial categories are assumed to be non-existent and irrelevant. Their works show that these assumptions regarding cyberspaces work to translate the structures of power that exist in our society. Kolko and Nakamura argue that by erasing (or purposely excluding) race from cyberspaces, the current dominant racial hierarchy becomes embodied in the interactions of its users in which the assumed race is white.[116] Though cyberspaces might be faux-blank environments where one can write in one's subjectivities, users, designers, and engineers all unintentionally bring with them to this new terrain the same

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[115] Kolko, "Erasing @race," 213.
[116] Ibid.

assumptions and power relations that some attempt to leave behind with their bodies when logging on to the virtual worlds. However, these power relations manifest and appear in different forms and structures not analogous to those of "real" world. Therefore the contextual locations out of which cyberspaces come into existence influence the type of experiences and interactions that occur online, but do not entirely limit them.

The bodies of the subjects of this study, queer Egyptian men, are located primarily in the cosmopolitan city of Cairo. However, their subjectivities do not end with their bodies as they expand virtually in all directions through cyberspace. When these men log on to the net, they enter the realm and dominion of the many multinational corporations that construct and regulate the cyberspace. These corporations act as nation-states setting political and ideological boundaries through the development of their specific "user-friendly" interfaces. However, these boundaries are partly constructed along the already existing ideological axioms that tend to comprise culture-specific assumptions and ideas.[117] The cyberspaces are then the virtual manifestations of the many global forces that shape and create subjectivities. Through the mechanisms of capitalism and a "free market economy," the multinational corporations and its technology serve as the accomplices to the hegemonic powers of imperialism, orientalism, and colonialism. Thus, the world that cyberspaces claim to distance us from becomes programmed and coded into cyberspace itself. The manifestation of the contextual dominant social tendencies, however, reveals itself in cyberspaces through new and creative but, nevertheless, indoctrinating and regulating forms.

The contextual location of cyberspaces calls attention to the crucial factor of the politics of authorship in these cyberspaces. Who designs these virtual terrains and for what purpose? The large majority of designers and architects of the vast expanse of cyberspaces are white male

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[117] Ibid., 219.

software engineers.[118] The design of these cyberspaces is sponsored by the multinational corporations and their main driving purpose is the profit that can be gained by the ownership of such a virtual space. However, I am not entirely attributing the responsibility of the hegemonic effects of the cyberspaces to their designers, but instead envision these public virtual spaces as another form of public media that provides a fragmented perspective of our cultures understanding of lived social realities and the dominant power matrix.

Manjam.com, the self-described "gay social network" is one of these corporate owned cyberspaces. Owned by HubJet, a proud LGBT UK based company, Manjam.com is designed solely in English, and it is not design-friendly to other language scripts, such as Arabic.[119] Manjam.com is advertised mainly to the English-speaking cosmopolitan global citizen, but it prides itself in appealing to a world-wide audience. Manjam.com offers free access with limited use. To fully access its functional features a user has to upgrade their account to "premium members" for $19.95 a month with the use of a credit card.[120] Queer Egyptian men utilize Manjam.com to develop networks and connections between themselves. Manjam.com became a prosthetic extension of their lived realities, establishing the framework and structure for a community based on affinity or the "the society" discussed in the previous chapter. This perceived isolated use of Manjam.com, however, must always be contextualized in the larger matrix of global interactions and the ways in which these global forces manifest in cyberspaces through the design of the interface.

The interface of Manjam.com serves the specific purpose of networking "gay-identified" English speaking individuals and it was designed with this specific group of users in mind. The

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[118] Nakamura, Lisa, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 106.
[119] *Manjam.com* and *HubJet*
[120] *Manjam.com*.

main structural framework of the website is the establishment of what Nakamura calls "menu-driven identities" or the representation of the self through a myopic and exclusionary set of categories/identities.[121] These "menu-driven identities" do not allow modification of the terms and categories provided by the interface. In Nakamura's study categories of race or ethnicity that do not appear on the menu of search engines Excite and Yahoo! and race-interest websites such as Generation D, AsianAvenue.com and BlackPlanet.com are "essentially foreclosed on or erased." Mainly focusing on Asian American hybrid identities, she explores how hybridity is erased even from Asian-interest websites that list all categories as discrete and non-overlapping excluding the hyphenated identities produced through colonialism and imperialism. In Manjam.com as well there is no possibility for the existence of these hyphenated and compound identities. The "menu-driven identities" of Manjam.com are the basis for the functioning of the website. They are designed into the interface to serve the specific purpose of categorizing users for easier and more efficient searches for potential optimal interactions and filtering of user profiles. The many categories enforced by the interface include: gender, ethnicity, body type, penis size, role in bed, sexuality, and more. The non-represented categories become colonized by the available categories because in order to interact with that cyberspace a user must choose a specific category. In addition to ethnicity and race, how do the limiting features of the interface, then, conceptualize and regulate queerness in a context of globalized interactions? How do specific subjectivities of sexual perversion and practices colonize other less dominant ways of understanding the world—subjugated knowledges?

The identity categories and terms for sexuality used in the website (straight, bisexual and gay) are based on a Western history of sexual identity and orientation. Most of these terms arose

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[121] Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 102.

from a very specific historical context, and are not encompassing of Egyptian local constructs of sexuality. When users are forced by the interface, upon registration, to choose a descriptor or category, the website is forcing a structure of sexual identity and sexual orientations upon the users of the website that might not be universally applicable. At this time the website is also limiting the possibilities within cyberspaces of *queering* normative sexual encounters. Though the body informs and limits our experiences online, it can also be reconfigured/rewritten online to allow bodily exchanges not physically possible such as being penetrated by a large group of users at the same time. As a result, the observed indirect enforcement of these sexual orientation and identity categories through the design of the interface of Manjam.com furthers the imperialist project of transposing Western concepts and ideas unto Eastern subjects.

Resistance to the Matrix: Hacking and Guerilla Warfare

However, the interface of Manjam.com and other corporate-owned cyberspaces is not entirely limiting or restricting. The interface sets the scene and regulates the interactions between users—establishing a politicized system of power relations. Foucault reminds us that *where there is power there is resistance.*[122] Cyberspaces have alternate uses embedded in them that can allow for the expression and realization of unintentional realities. However, in order to be able to access these gashes in the infrastructure, a level of familiarization with the system is required. Many of the users of Manjam.com, thus, are able to circumvent the limitations of the interface and transform these sites of indoctrination into sites of resistance and play. They strategically and creatively utilize the tools of the interface to develop an illegitimate and unrecognized self-representation and, also employ "low-tech" cyberspaces as a way to further develop networks, satisfy bodily

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[122] Foucault, Michel, "Power and Norm: Notes,*" in *Power, Truth and Strategy*, ed. M. Morris and P. Patton, (Sydney: Feral Publications, 1979), 60.

pleasures, and build communities despite the limitations of the corporate designed and controlled cyberspace. They become hackers and guerrillas.

The term *hacker* originated at MIT as a term to describe a technology user who "explores the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities… who enjoys the… challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations."[123] Like computer hackers, the queer Egyptian men that use Manjam.com are appropriating not only the integrated tools of the interface, but the categories that shape the design of its structural framework, to create unique self-representations of their sexual subjectivities. They break down the assumptions buried deep within the Western terms of sexual desire, activity and orientation by putting them in conversation with local identificatory and disidentificatory processes. The main feature of the interface that is used to "hack" in Manjam.com is the "profile headline," which is supposed to serve as a small introductory description. However, this function of the interface allows for a limited but creative interaction with the interface. Some Egyptian users utilize the "profile headline" as a way of expressing in Arabic script—a function not provided by the general framework of the interface of the website.[124]

Others use it as a tool to represent their desires or subjectivities that were excluded from the original interface design. Some of these creative manipulations of the "profile headline" include: "lookin for shemale," "Chubby lover & chaser," "seeking feminine and cute transladys, trannys, ladyboys for friendship," "Egyptian male slave ready to serve any mistress" or "Str8 man looking for shemale or ladyboy." By using the "profile headline," these users are employing their knowledge of the website to break away from the limited categories and desires provided by menu-

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[123] Raymond 1999: 189 in Nelson, "Maya Hackers and the Cyberspatialized Nation-State," 291.
[124] This issue is not only specific to Manjam.com. The majorities of cyberspaces are constructed in English and lack the capabilities to manifest any other writing scripts than the dominant Latin script.

driven identities. They are also at the same time decoding and reprogramming Western categories and subjectivities of sexual orientation and desires. They translate Western categories into their own cultural and linguistic understanding sometimes as direct transliterations. One profile heading read as follows:

انا توب 31 سنه من القاهرة عايز سالب ناعم دلوع لمقابله جادة وكاميرا لكاميرا

i'm 31/top/cairo looking for smooth bottom for real meet&cam2cam

Though the Arabic and the English closely resemble each other there are key differences between the versions presented by the user. The Arabic script begins with a literal transliteration of the English word "top" into Arabic. The entire Arabic segment is written in the very local Egyptian *Ammiyya* or dialect, and refrains from the use of any proper *Fusha* or Modern Standard Arabic. Another interesting difference is that in the Arabic a desire for a bottom is expressed with the Arabic word for "negative." Unlike the category top that is transliterated from the English, the category of bottom or passive partner is not of the same value as it is recoded in the Arabic. The Arabic word for negative also creates an imagery of a concave figure ready to be penetrated—an object—further exacerbating the categorical and ideological difference between the two roles of same-sex practices. It is also important to note the user's understanding of English slang and internet lingo such as cam2cam and the common internet descriptive request of a/s/l (age/sex/location), which he does both in English and Arabic. However, instead of delineating his sex, the user states his preferred sexual practice.

Through representations such as "str8 man looking for shemale or ladyboy," users are also challenging the assumptions behind the category of a straight man. Is a straight man's desire for a ladyboy conceptualized through the normative category of straight or heterosexual? As explored in the previous chapter, sexuality for some queer Egyptian men is not understood in terms of identity, but instead as a supplemental sexual practice. However, what kind of effect does this

subversion of Western categories on the global stage of cyberspace have on individual subjectivities? In order to construct such a perversion of a category, Egyptian queer men must develop an understanding of the conventional meaning of the term—become acquainted with the rules of the system. These non-conventional users are thus hacking the interface of the website. They utilize and explore the capabilities of this pre-determined system, creatively over-coming its categorical limitations and stretching the conventional boundaries of the categories themselves. Through Western eyes, these men are deemed to be corrupting the heterosexual identity and elicit a reaction of how such an identity is possible, while at same challenging the Westerner's conceptualization of heterosexuality.

However, as previously described, some users have incorporated the gay identity as part of their self-understanding. Unlike the majority of profile headlines that are extremely focused on sexual practices and desires, some users are looking for a partnership or emotionally stable relationship that is deemed customary of Western homosexual relationships. Some men confirm the Western assumption of "Oriental bisexuality" by portraying themselves as sexually active with men and engaged in heterosexual marriages. Others completely outright reject any form of homosexual identity and its community or "gay" society with statements such as "no society guys" or "if you are society guy I will know and not respond." The irony is that the delineation of the society is not as simple as it is thought to be perceived for the different identities are constantly at play, re-arranging themselves in relation to each other.

Another interesting unconventional use of Manjam.com is the advertisement of sex for cash. Though the site does allow for advertisements of LGBT-friendly businesses, it was not constructed as a form of online prostitution. Some use it as a medium to advertise their skills as masseurs and their services: erotic massages. Others simply advertise themselves as sexual objects

for sale: "I am cash only $$$$$" or انا كاش فقط اي توب عاوز ينام معايا كاش يا حبيبي [I am cash only, any top that wants to sleep with me, cash, *habibi*]. The majority of the men that advertise their bodies for cash were self-identified ladyboys, again reinforcing their desirability in the economy of pleasure. Through their profiles they constructed themselves as objects for consumption often including a variety of pictures of themselves in drag. This is another example of how the Egyptian queer subjects manipulate or hack the interface framework to fulfill their needs, in this case monetary as well as sexual.

Hacking is also about the "ability to form networks for communication and information sharing."[125] The "free" users of Manjam.com are restricted to a predetermined amount of use in a specific time frame: received messages disappear from a free user's inbox after a few days, number of profiles that can be viewed daily is restricted and a limited amount of outgoing daily messages is enforced. Can a local Egyptian really pay $19.95 (~119.7 Egyptian pounds) a month to use a website to its full capacity, when the average weekly wage is around 300 EGPs?[126] As a result of these financially enforced limitations, the Egyptian users thus organize and establish their communities outside of the established framework of the corporate-owned cyberspace. They utilize guerilla-like forms of organization through the use of "low-tech" practices, such as emails and cellphones to establish rhizomatic communal networks. Users exchange this type of information through the "profile heading" and personal messages. Due to the low number of free messages, initial interactions revolve around the exchange of "low-tech" interactional information, such as phone numbers and email addresses. I characterize these alternate cyberspaces as "low-tech" for they are a kind of technology that tends to be more accessible than the "high-tech" spaces

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[125] Nelson, "Maya Hackers and the Cyberspatialized Nation-State," 289.
[126] Abdel Salam, Mohamed, "Egypt: Average weekly wage 329 Egyptian pounds ($60)," *BikyaMasr,* May 13, 2010, accessed November 24, 2012, http://www.bikyamasr.com/12424/egypt-average-weekly-wage-329-egyptian-pounds-60.

controlled and designed by multi-national corporations.[127] These guerilla-like hacker queer Egyptian men thus establish illegitimate and unrecognized communities through the subversion and manipulation of the West's imperial tools and machines.

Conclusion: Virtual Reality or Social Reality?

Cyberspace emphasize the performativity of identities. They require us to textually perform and taken on identities. Cyberspaces allow us the possibility of *queering* sexual exchanges for though our bodies never cease to exist they can be re-assembled and re-scripted in ways that are not physically possible (without causing severe pain at least). However, exchanges between virtual identities are never free from the many regulatory forces (political, social, economic, cultural, linguistic, etc.) that dominate and permeate our social interactions. Instead these forces along with identities become codified and encrypted into cyberspaces, and, thus, becoming another battleground for the manifestation of resistance against hegemonic forces. Cyberspaces allow those who have access to it the possibility to imagine alternative ways of resisting the dominant matrix of power by using its tools to circumvent its limiting structures. By embracing the politics of disidentification and becoming illegible in cyberspaces, queer Egyptian men are able to challenge the rigidity of identity categories. Though not all of the men embrace a disidentificatory practice regarding their sexuality, they take on its methodology through the process of inscribing themselves online by circumventing the limiting "menu-driven identities" available.

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[127] Nakamura, *Cybertypes*, 102.

Epilogue

The Identity Roulette Never Ceases to Spin:
Who Let the Ghosts In?

"Do not forget: this visitation/
Is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose."[128]
---Ghost

[Enter Ghosts]

As I have conceptualized, written, and revised this work, several ghosts or spectres have occupied my mind. These ghosts, the products of violent events, murders, and executions, haunt my narrative of identificatory and disidentificatory practices. Like Horatio in *Hamlet* I have demanded they speak. Yet, they do not. Instead, these barely visible apparitions hover around this work as if attempting to accomplish a significant task—their unfinished business—before laying peacefully to rest.

[Exeunt Ghosts]

A week before my departure from Egypt, Sharif hosted another party at his place in Mohandesseen. Much had changed since the first party at his place. I was seen as one of the rest, a member of the group. We had traveled to Alexandria, shared *Suhoor[129]* at Heliopolis (a historic suburb of Cairo), attended parties (in and out of Cairo), became Facebook friends, but the main difference was that this time I was with Kaboo: the light-skinned green-eyed man whom I picked during the question game at the first party. This party was an uncanny repetition of the first: the same divided structure between tops and bottoms, similar music, bellydancing, drinking, smoking hashish and even the same people.

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[128] Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. (3.4 115). http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/
[129] *Suhoor* is the meal before the al day fast marked by the *fajr* or dawn call to prayer during the holy month of Ramadan.

[Enter First Ghost]

Throughout history, Western representations of the Middle East have depicted the Orient as a monolithic entity that is exotic, traditional, religious and backwards. This reduction of the Orient to a list of tropes has been named by Edward Said as *Orientalism* or "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience."[130] It is the assumption that the Orient is different from the West. As a result of a history of colonialism and imperialism the Orient is established as an object for the West's scrutiny.[131] Therefore, a central challenge for this thesis concerned how to create a portrait of Egypt that avoided rendering the place and its subjects according to Orientalist tropes such as the dreadful barbaric and over-sexualized Orient. Orientalism also brings into question the politics of representation. Who has the right to tell whose stories and how do these stories become distorted through a chain of transmission?[132] As a result, through this ethnographic endeavor, I do not intend to claim authorship of the stories of the lives of the many queer men I encountered. Instead I presented my own interpretation of the experiences and memories we created together. In the end, identities are constantly changing. I only write from what (I think) I know.

Though Orientalism helps a Western academic avoid oversimplifying a representation of the East by bringing to light the unequal power relationships between the East and West, it can also be a limiting methodology. It binds us to think in binaries—the same ones it tries to drive us away from. It also restricts the opportunities of pleasure that power relationships themselves can create. "*Orientalism* would make it the ultimate crime to imagine an S&M fantasy between a foreigner and an Egyptian playing on the power dynamics of East/West, North/South,

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[130] Said, Edward, *Orientalism,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1.
[131] Ibid., 3.
[132] Ibid., 20.

developed/third-world, US-hegemony/Arab-subjugation, occupation/resistance, you name it."[133] Instead, in a Spivakian move, I embraced a *strategic* deployment of an anti-Orientalist methodology allowing me to be conscious of my location of power vis-à-vis the Orient, while allowing me the possibilities of pleasure and for conceptualizing resistance.

[Exeunt First Ghost]

This was my last night with the group as I had to focus on concluding my duties at Resala as part of my grant. After an hour of drinks and conversation we decided to head out to the regular *qahwa* for our final encounter. When we arrived in Zamalek, we met up with Zain, an Egyptian living in Brazil who joined our group throughout the summer. As we sat down, Zain began to tell us the series of unfortunate events that occurred throughout his day. He met with a police officer whom he connected with through an online dating site. Zain drove to downtown to pick him up. After receiving Zain's blowjob, the police officer assaulted him and stole his car, computer and all of his identity documents. They never exchanged names and the police officer later contacted Zain asking him for money in exchange for the stolen items.

[Enter Second Ghost]

My exchanges with this group of men occurred in the shadows of the infamous May 11, 2001 police raid of the Queen Boat discotheque. During the raid, fifty-five men were arrested, while the foreigners in attendance were allowed to go free.[134] The detained men were transported to the local prison where they were coerced into signing confessions through forms of torture. [135] They were whipped, beaten, bound, suspended in painful positions, splashed with ice-cold water,

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[133] Wilde, Ralph, Dianne Otto, Doris E. Buss, Amr Shalakany, and Aeyal Gross, "Queering international law," *American Society of International Law. Proceedings of the Annual Meeting*: (2007). 11.

[134] Three of the detained men were released due to family connections to important politicians.

[135] *In a Time of Torture: The Assault on Justice in Egypt's Crackdown on Homosexual Conduct*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004).

burned with cigarettes, stripped, electrocuted, raped, and subjected to "medical" anal examinations.[136] Simultaneously, various local media outlets depicted them as "sexual perverts" and members of a satanic cult, whose main ritual involved homosexual practices. The Queen Boat incident also gained the attention of international media inciting the response of international LGBT rights organizations seeking to liberate "gay" subjects from the oppressive Egyptian state. On November 14, 2001, fifty of the men were charged with *fujur[137]* or "debauchery" and the remaining two received the highest sentence—a combination of public debauchery and contempt of religion.[138] The following May, all of the verdicts, except for the convictions for religious contempt, were overturned and sent to a new trial that ended in March 2003 resulting in twenty-one men being given three-year jail sentences.[139]

The Queen Boat incident is the largest police raid of queer men in Egypt today. However, even before the bar raid, queer men had been victims of entrapment, police brutality and torture.[140] Most of the police activity occurred online for the Ministry of Interior had started surveillance of the Internet, answering advertisements of men seeking men, arranging meetings with them and subsequently arresting them.[141] It is this memory of the only mass-scale raid of "homosexuals" in Egypt that haunted many of my interactions with the men. It penetrated our conversations unexpectedly, similar to the ways in which repressed traumatic memories possess a subject and

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[136] Ibid., 2.
[137] Under the Article 9c of Law No. 10 of 1961 on the Combat of Prostitution.
[138] Ibid., 129.
[139] "Egypt: IGLHRC Protests Double Jeopardy," *International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission,* July, 2, 2003, accessed April 14, 2013, http://www.iglhrc.org/content/egypt-iglhrc-protests-double-jeopardy.
[140] This was a result of the state operating under an Emergency Law (Law No. 162 of 1968), which began during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, expired in May 31, 2012 and was reinstated in recently in January 2013. The law allowed the state to suspend constitutional rights, enforce censorship and arrest any Egyptian citizen for any period of time, and virtually no reason. This law was the main governmental mechanism that allowed for the flourishing of the infamous *Aml el-Dawal* or secret police that performed most of the repression.
[141] After the Queen Boat incident many websites that were used primary to network Queer Men such as gayegypt.com were shut down. Only until recently was the website open again for activity.

returns uinivitedly to disturb the present.[142] None of them ever explicitly referenced the event. However, their daily interactions are today marked with safety precautions even online where many of the profiles include pictures with the individual's face blacked out. Sex and fear have become a discursive couple and was the reason many of the men kept their same-sex practices hidden from their family and non-queer friends. Egypt might be a place where a multiplicity of subjectivities and (dis)identificatory practices occur and are re-assembled but with each spin of the roulette the odds are augmented. This seemingly innocent game of pleasure and desire becomes a gamble between life and death.

However, as Massad points out, the Queen Boat incident was not a repression of same-sex practices. Instead, what was being policed was "the sociopolitical identification of these practices with the Western identity of gayness and the publicness that these gay-identified men seek."[143] Many of the men who were arrested recounted being interviewed and asked, "Are you gay?" Khaled told Human Rights Watch, "He [Taha Embaby the head of the Cairo Vice Squad] used the term 'gay' in English. I said that I didn't know what the word meant. He used the word because he wants you to repeat it back to him as an answer. And if you know what it means, if you pronounce it in the English way, then you are definitely gay."[144] It is here that the discourse about sexuality produces sexualized subjects. Knowledge of Western categories of sexuality (meaning in this instance knowing how to pronounce them) marked Khaled in the eyes of the state as gay. The danger here lies in being read as a Western "gay," and is one of the causes for the Identity Roulette in which the queer Egyptian men constantly find themselves having to circulate their subjectivities and identities.

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[142] Caruth, Cathy, "Introduction," *Trauma: Explorations in Memory,* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.
[143] Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, XX.
[144] *In Time of Torture,* 10.

[Exeunt Second Ghost]

We nostalgically recounted the past months together and discussed our futures. Muhammad was going to start his mandatory military service; Akram was going to reapply to school to pursue a Master's in Business Administration; Mahmoud was going to finish his film project and I was going back to Duke to finish my last year as an undergraduate. It was also the last week of the holy month of Ramadan so everyone had to return to their families early to begin planning for the big *Eid al-Fitr* celebration or the Feast of Breaking the Fast. After saying goodbye to the group (and smoking hash with them), Kaboo asked me if he could come home with me since his family lived in a village outside of Cairo and he did not want to spend the night alone.

[Enter Third Ghost]

Throughout this thesis, I conducted you, the reader, through many discursive spaces as the ethnographic guide. Until now you have followed me in and out of different aspects of queer lives in Cairo beginning with my initial encounter in the small *qahwa* in a back alley of Zamalek to my ephemeral virtual conversations on *Manjam.com*. I have even invited you into the alleged privacy of my sexual encounters. The chapter structure of this thesis is by no means a linear progression as the chapters intersect each other thematically and chronologically. Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate how each of these ethnographic spaces are limited by the "values" and "rules" assigned to them specifically and how subjects negotiate the constraints demarcated by the specific spaces creating sometimes contradictory outcomes. At this point, academic conventions require me to come to an end and conclude, to summarize and digest the complexities discussed throughout—a task that for me has never seemed appropriate.

However, this is not a conclusion. A clean and static conclusion for this work is an impossibility. The stories I tell within these pages have not ended by any means. They continue as

this thesis is written, read, and analyzed. They are not as fixed and stable as portrayed in their textual rendering. Committing them to text partly means restraining and containing them, fixing them in a place. At the same time, textual inscription seeks to make the many stories and events in this project legible by parsing them into digestible pieces, creating "meaningful" cultural texts through their fixation, reducing the fluidity of life. This is a result of academic practices that desire to transform these stories into (respectable) forms of knowledge adhering to scriptocentric values and regimes. Instead through this epilogue, as suggested by the title, I hope to have, in Dwayne Conquergood's words, "put mobility into action, and agency back into play."[145] The assumption and scripting of identities and the disidentificatory process that is central to this endeavor is itself a constant performance pointing towards their performativity which flourishes in the liminal and contested spaces of cosmopolitan Cairo.[146]

[Exeunt Third Ghost]

During the cab ride back, Kaboo asked me if I wanted to smoke hash before the start of the fast. I declined since I had to wake up early in the morning to teach my Spanish class. After arriving at my apartment we talked for a few minutes, shared *suhoor,* Skyped with a friend from Singapore, opened a Facebook account for him to stay in touch with me, and, well, you can imagine the rest.

In the morning, Kaboo asked me for a present to remember me by. I asked him what he would like. I did not have many possessions with me. He requested a signed bill from my other wallet where I kept all my money. I was confused. How did he know that I had a second wallet? Noticing my hesitation, he quickly interjected, "I saw you take money out of it before." I pulled out the wallet and asked him which bill he would like: a Qatari Riyal or a Turkish Lira. He rejected

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[145] Conquergood, Dwight, "Beyond the Text: Toward a Performative Cultural Politics," in *The Future of Performance Studies: Visions and Revisions,* ed. Sheron J. Dailey, (Washington: National Communication Association, 1998), 30.
[146] Ibid., 32.

my offer and instead pointed to the fifty Turkish Lira bill that was in my other hand. Fifty Turkish Lira is about 190 Egyptian Pounds. If he wanted it for a mere keepsake why would he want the largest bill I own? I told him "no" since that was a lot of money. He became angry and said, "I am not with you for your money if that is what you are thinking." Kaboo stormed off and that was the last I ever saw of him.

Before I left for work, I received a call from Akram. "Is Kaboo with you?" he asked. "No, why?" "Did he offer you to smoke hash last night?" "Yes, he did. Why?" "I knew it, I knew it." Apparently, Kaboo had stolen the hash from him the night before. "Kaboo is not a good person. It's good that you are leaving," he opined. Akram told me how Kaboo had slept with Attef, a mutual friend of ours, only to have a place to sleep. He had lied to everyone about his identity, family history and job. In reality, Kaboo was unemployed and no one knew the truth about this family. He was struggling financially and was exploiting everyone he knew.

At this moment, Kaboo's deception had shattered the pleasure-filled fantasy I had constructed of my sexual encounters in Egypt. I felt betrayed and angry. How could he lie to me? Retroactively, this moment also grounded me in reality and reminded me that sexuality along with all aspects of our embodied realities are constantly intersecting and being assembled. The Identity Roulette is not only composed of sexuality, but of also the many identities that we shift in and out of throughout our daily encounters. Slowing down the roulette allows us to see how the identities are naturalized by the centrifugal force of the spinning roulette. As we call bets by taking on specific identities we rely on specific strategies of resistance hoping that the odds will turn in our favor. The Identity Roulette is a risky game and only those with the house edge (or whose identities are acknowledged as proper ways of life) have an advantage.

[Exeunt Omnes.]

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