

Queering Middle Eastern Contemporary art and its Diaspora

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Andrew Gayed is an Egyptian visual artist and art historian, born and raised in Toronto Canada. Completing his Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Arts with a Minor in Women's and Gender studies, themes of race, displacement, and culture are foundational in his practice. Currently completing his Masters of Arts in Art History at Carleton University, his dissertation investigates Middle Eastern Contemporary Art, with a focus on photographic art being produced by the North American diaspora. This includes Middle Eastern artists (such as himself) working from Canada and the United States, creating artwork surrounding diasporic identity; his research emphasizes themes of migration, and the political artwork that is associated with the diasporic community. Gayed has been the recipient of notable awards including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Award, and chapters of his dissertation have been presented at conferences internationally, including Oxford University on two occasions, in addition to presentations before Canadian and American audiences.

Using the artwork of New York-based Egyptian Artist, Youssef Nabil, as a case study for my analysis, I will explore the concept of Islamic and non-Western Modernity and their relationship to the diaspora, Arab sexualities, and Arab masculinities. This discussion will have us thinking about Arab homo-sexualities in terms of desire and alternative masculinities rather than Western notions of visibility and coming out. The analysis of Youssef Nabil's photographs will help investigate the codification of Middle Eastern masculinity through a visual language, and destabilize homo-colonial discourses of Western Modernity. Through the analysis of Nabil's photographic art, my intent is to see if we can reach a Modernity narrative that works beyond sexual oppression versus acceptance, and instead examines a negotiation of diasporic sexuality by incorporating different sociological strategies to help self-identification categories be less dichotomous. This discussion will engage with how the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America experiences the impact of homo-colonialism in a less historiographical discussion, and

one more rooted in sociological ideas of gender, nationalism, and sexuality, as well as the triangulation of identity and oppression that could arise at their intersection.

Current literature engaging with Middle Eastern homosexuality is focused on issues of Modernity, multiple Modernities, and the West's claim to Modernity. Modernity¹ as a time period signals social, political, and historic conditions (typically urbanization, mass production, democratization, etc.) at the end of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century. Characteristically within Eurocentric writings of art history, such as that of Paul Wood, Western Modernity was seen as the pinnacle of the advancement of modern industrial societies and social progress.² While Wood tries to foster dialogue with art produced in contact zones and the impact of the exotic Other on the rest of Europe, he still writes in unwavering favor of European exceptionalism and for an imperialist account of history. While paying lip service to the fact that "European knowledge of the wider world was partial, and unmistakably framed by a growing sense of European superiority,"³ such criticism is lost in his dismissive reading of Orientalist visual art. Furthermore, overarching statements that claim "it was the art of Manet and his followers, the impressionists, that definitively established the connection between modern subjects and modern techniques" reproduces the same Eurocentric cannon that relegates the Other as marginal/derivative, and ignores the Egyptian modernist painter

¹ Not to be confused with Modernism, which are the cultural trends that respond to

² This is evident in his book, *Western Art and the Wider World*.

³ Wood, Paul. *Western Art and the Wider World*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014. Page 143.

Mohamed Nagy (among countless other non-Western artists) who visited impressionist painter Monet in Giverny in 1918, and later exhibiting in the Paris Salon.⁴

Scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo, Irene Silverblatt and Sonia Saldivar-Hull are but a few who question this new imperial structure of power, and examine how Modernity can be a method to colonize social and cultural practices in the name of Western advancement. They argue that Modernity is formed by European philosophers, academics and politicians, and that modernity involves the colonization of time and space in order to create a border in relation to a self-determining Other and its' own European identity; in this way, Europeans colonized the world and built on the ideas of Western civilization and modernity as the endpoints of historical time, and Europe as the center of the world.⁵ Mignolo also goes as far to say that coloniality⁶ is constitutive of modernity, and there is no modernity without coloniality.⁷ Ultimately, the literature on Arab sexualities contends that the West created a discourse around sexuality that the Middle East never had, leading to the notion of homocolonialism, imperialist ideologies in the name of sexual tolerance. As a push against colonial forces and imperialism, homosexuality in the Middle East was then made into an illegal identity category, an identity category that I argue did not exist prior to this increased contact with Western explorers and travelers.

⁴ Eigner, Saeb, and Isabelle Caussé. *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. London: Merrell, 2010. Page 19

⁵ Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁶ This is a term that Mignolo uses in his writing, and signals modernity's elaborate façade of "civilizing" as its necessary foundation in the terror-logic of imperial rule. Page X of preface in: Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

⁷ Mignolo, Walter. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Page 3.

WESTERN MODERNITY AND THE ARAB WORLD

With the scholars unpacking the impacts of Western Modernity and its legacy,⁸ much attention is given to issues of language and translation— so simply “speaking” about Arab homosexuality has its pitfalls. For example, the Arabic word for sex, *jins*, appeared sometime in the early twentieth century and held the meaning of both biological sex, and national⁹ origin. Previously the word has existed in Arabic since ancient times and derived from the Greek *genus*, and only held more biological meanings of *type*, *kind* and *ethnolinguistic* origins; but as late as 1870 its connotation of sex and nationalism had not yet come into usage.¹⁰ Similarly, in the 1950s translators of Freud coined the unspecific term for sexuality, *jinsiyyah*, which also means nationality and citizenship. Here, post-contact and under colonialism, we see how the Arabic language changed to include sexuality discourses *as a part of* identity discourses, many of times indistinguishable from one another. The conflation of sex, sexuality, nationality, and biology introduces an identity discourse that did not exist in the Arabic language prior to the late nineteenth-century. This marks a significant shift in local identity scripts being colonized by Western Modernity narratives, erasing with it the previously fluid gender norms. This is relevant when looking at surviving Middle Eastern and later Islamic literature from the fourth to

⁸ Kathryn Babayan, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Dina Al-Kassim, Valerie Traub, Rahman Momin, Joseph Massad, Samar Habib, and Jocelyn Scarlet are only a handful of scholars working to unpack the baggage of Western Modernity and its colonial implications. Further discussion on the colonial models they engage with are written about in my literature review at the start of this thesis.

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

¹⁰ Joseph Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World." *Public Culture*. Volume 14 (2). 2002. Page 371.

thirteenth century which narrate examples of homo-social relations and gay desire, none of which illustrate “gay” as existing as a stable identity. Discussing the homoerotic liaisons between the Mamluk elite in late medieval Egypt and Syria, Everett Rowson states that the public expression of homoerotic sentiments (especially in poetry) was fully sanctioned by Islamic societies both before and during the Mamluk period of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, however too-public homosexual behavior was not condoned.¹¹ Likewise, Traub illustrates that Arab-Islamic texts speak frequently about the androgynous beauty of beardless boys and are explicit too about anal intercourse and fellatio.¹²

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

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

¹² Valerie Traub, "The Past is a Foreign Country? the Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations Across Temporal Geographies of Desire.* , eds. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Harvard University., 2008) Page 24.

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

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

FORMAL AESTHETICS

I would like to take the time to discuss the formal elements Nabil employs in his artistic practice. His photographs comprise of hand-tinted silver gelatin prints, disrupting our notion of the photographic medium. Youssef Nabil went to one of the last portrait studios

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

in Egypt practicing this method of photography “to learn this old technique and be able to add a contemporary edge to it in [his] work.”¹⁵ As Michael Stevenson discusses, Nabil’s oeuvre engages with both the discourse of both photography and painting. His has been located within the Western art practices of David Hockney and Wolfgang Tillmans,¹⁶ but subtly shifting the way intimacy is represented, something rarely acknowledged in Western art practice and traditional portraiture.

While daguerreotypes amazed the world in the 1830’s, having images appear in full colour rather than the rich sepia tones of early photographs became inescapable. In response, photographers attempted to add colour by hand-tinting the developed photographic image in a series of “colourizing” techniques referred to as “overpainting.”¹⁷ These colourizing technologies and techniques were an attempt to produce an image that best mimicked realism, and best reproduced an authentic representation of reality. Formally, Nabil’s photographs are then not meant to be true-to-life representations as the medium would suggest, but hand-tinting the images in the twenty-first century transforms them into an uncanny and illusory form that is no longer within the bounds of traditional photography. Hand tinting is a method of manipulating these personal images as a subversive way to transform reality and interject lived experience and self-narration of one’s personal reality. I argue that this hand tinting is useful to the destabilization of linear narrative, and achieves what Homi K. Bhabha

¹⁵ Sans, Jeremy. *As Close As I Can Get*. Interview with Youssef Nabil, Venice. June 2007. Access on artist website.

http://www.youssefnabil.com/articles/as_close_as_i_can_get.html

¹⁶ Emin, Tracy, Youssef Nabil, Simon Njami, Mark Sealy, and Michael Stevenson. *Sleep in My Arms*. South Africa: Cape Town, 2007. Page 88.

¹⁷ Watkins, Patsy G. The Painted Photograph, 1839-1914: Origins, Techniques, Aspirations. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Spring, 1997, Vol.74(1), p.217(2)

describes in his writing as a necessary tool for incorporating subaltern narratives; a rupturing of “the past being linked to the necessary future.”¹⁸ In this way, I argue that this hand-tinting is also a method of re-writing Western scripts of Modernity to introduce local narratives of Middle Eastern sexuality.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

While in other chapters of this research I have examined Youssef Nabil’s photographs in the context of nationalism, exile, migration and diaspora, I want to focus this analysis on a series of seemingly homo-erotic and subversive photographs that transcend our current understanding of Middle Eastern sexuality. This discussion will have us thinking about Arab homo-sexualities in terms of desire and alternative masculinities rather than Western notions of homosexuality predicated in “born this way” campaigns; which are not conducive to understanding broader issues of homocolonial discourses, and how queer Arabs living in the West experience their sexuality. With this said, I do not want to reduce the Western model of homosexuality to an essentialist and colonial ruse, Western scholars such as Judith Butler argue that gendered identity is an ongoing performance rather than a predetermined genetic entity. It is important to understand here that neither model categorically fits the gendered or sexual identity of the diaspora, nor do they account for the cultural dichotomies negotiated by non-Western subjects in the West.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Page 205.

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

here that then re-codifies this male body as being homoerotic? These are larger issues that I intend to address in future research projects, and only begin to address in this analysis.

With this codification of masculinity in mind, I would like to discuss the process of meaning making in interpreting both masculinity and homosocial desire through Nabil's photographs. In looking at *Ahmed in Djellabah, New York, 2004* (Figure B) and *Ali in Abaya, Paris, 2007* (Figure C) we have two depictions of men: one wearing an *abbeya* (Ali), which is traditionally used in prayer, and the other a *gallabaya* (Ahmed), which is traditionally worn around the house or as outerwear. These distinctions are relevant, for the codification of masculinity and homoeroticism lies in these details. Ironically, the *gallabaya*, which signifies that this is a private scene, is almost less eroticized than the *abbeya* which would be for public prayer. The photograph of Ali has us focusing on the hairy chest and the slit in the *abbeya* very teasingly opened to the man's midsection (and even lower) to accentuate an erotic tension. While the insinuating nature of the man in the *gallabaya* sprawled on the bed with his legs open to us certainly has its implications, I want us to think about how sexuality is experienced in the public and private spheres, and the religious implications when these spheres intersect. Here, I am suggesting that the private then becomes public, and we have a de-privatization of homoerotic codification, something very different when we look at historic representations of same sex desire in Middle Eastern literature. I focus on the geography of the diaspora in other chapters of my analysis, and it will not be overlooked here. The fact that these photographs were taken in both New York and Paris (and the artist wants us to know this by including the locations in the title), further implicates how the

diasporic subject experiences their sexuality in the liminal and in-between identity category discussed earlier.

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

Let us juxtapose this narrative to *Not Afraid to Love, Paris, 2005* (Figure E).¹⁹ The sexual assertiveness present in this photograph is most certainly distinguished from the fear and trauma experienced in the Cairo representation. Here, in the Paris narrative, the colours are much brighter and much more vibrant than the subdued pink and the dark blacks in the Cairo picture.

While *What Have We Done Wrong, Cairo* has an ominous underground feeling of hiding and shame due to the colour palate, lighting, and dramatic tension, *Not Afraid to Love, Paris* uses its colour to imply stability and comfort; even though both figures are not gazing at each other, the tension is relieved. It is because of this juxtaposition that the subversive nature of these photographs is subtle and seemingly problematic. Each image

¹⁹ Interestingly, this image illustrates the cover of Brian Whittaker's book, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East*.

reflects the general attitudes of the locations for which they were named. Cairo depicts a sense of shame and wrongdoing, while Paris implies freedom and a sense of peace; each image seemingly adopts the homonormative tone of its cultural geography. Rather than reduce these complex images as being a part of the what Joseph Massad calls the Gay International, a mission of homocolonialism and Western exceptionalism, I argue that by expressing and representing the real impact and emotion surrounding these cultural attitudes, Nabil is reverting back to local identity narratives and codes of masculinity and desire.

Nabil's photographs show the homosocial relations visible in the pre-Modern social couplings in the Middle East (as outlined earlier in the surviving Middle Eastern and later Islamic literature from the fourth to thirteenth century, narrating examples of homo-social relations and gay desire). These local narratives lie in the disidentification of normative Queer identity as it exists in the West, and instead adopts a queerness rooted in male relations with men rather than predicating an identity category. This fluidity allows for the subjects in Nabil's photographs to function outside the prescribed assumptions associated with Western queerness, and rather resembles the sexuality scripts that existed pre-contact. This is not to say that colonialism erased completely the local sexuality narratives outlined by Babayab, Najmabadi, Habib, and countless others, and it does not assume an unproblematic notion that those sexuality scripts existed at a pure state. With Homi Bhabha's writings on hybridity and the location of culture, we can assume that a pure and uncontaminated sexuality scrip never existed in the Middle East, even pre-contact. What I suggest then is to highlight how artists like Youssef Nabil are using photography to illustrate the local sexuality scripts that have become predominantly and

overwhelmingly the Western Queer narrative. This narrative is steeped in identity formations that erase the fluid sexuality as seen in the Mamluk Elites of late medieval Egypt, or the homosocial female companionship in seventeenth-century Safavid Iran. The revival of these local sexuality scripts I argue is seen in Youssef Nabil's homoerotic photography that has an openness to reject the rigidity of a Western Queer identity category, and rather illustrate homosocial relations void of the mandatory homosexual identity that, I have argued, is a product of Western Modernity.

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

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

LETTING IN

Narrative Psychologist Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett has coined the term “letting-in” as a way to negotiate and alter Western narratives of coming out. This is a process that she describes as the conscious and selective invitation of people into one’s “club of life” as she puts it.²⁰ Here, letting-in is a process that is highly relevant to the diaspora, as it is a way to alter perceptions of what it means to live a truly gay life, and falsifies the Western need to become more visible in order to be complete. Nabil’s artworks discussed thus far exemplify networks of communications that are different from the global-to-local homocolonial imposition of gay identity that most contemporary literature on the topic focuses on; instead, I argue that these local networks are *let-in* by homosexual, queer, male-desiring subjects in North America, and gay Middle Eastern diasporic subjects are

²⁰ Sekneh Hammoud-Beckett, "Azima Ila Hayati- an Invitation in to My Life: Narrative Conversations about Sexual Identity." *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work* 2007, no. 1 (2007): 29-39.

then creating an alternative coming out narrative and identity script than the inscribed Western model. The visual reading of *Rashid With a Shisha in his Mouth, Paris, 2004* (Figure T) can illuminate how local instances of homosociality cite traditional sexuality scripts, and reject the Western queer identity narrative that becomes exclusionary in non-Western contexts. These photographs then become just one example of how these local networks of identity are transmitted through visual language, and alternative sexuality scripts are written.

Rahman Momin argues that Islamophobia and homophobia reinforce one another through a process of triangulation. Explaining the lack of belonging to either a Western or Arab sexuality discourse, Momin claims the Muslim community sees a gay Muslim as an unviable identity, stemming from homophobia and larger systemic issues of racism in our post 9-11 societies. Similarly, Western gay communities also see the gay Muslim as an unviable identity due to Islamophobic and neo-Orientalist discourses that are used to Other and isolate Arab narratives in themes of terrorism and social oppression.²¹ With the unquestioned assumption of inherent homophobia within an Arab identity, the Western gay community upholds the impossibility of the gay Arab, and fits their existence within the pre-existing models of Western homosexuality. Here, the gay Arab is stuck in a perilous existence, an *in-between* status that is deemed an unviable subject in both communities. It is this in-between or liminal existence that the current discourse on Western homosexuality does not account for, and why there is an urgent need to re-

²¹ Momin, *Homosexualities, Muslim Cultures and Modernity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

conceptualize the terms in which we understand homosexual identity and its manifestations in social and cultural texts. Referring to the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America as Arab culture continued in America,²² articulating Arabness becomes a difficult battle between rigid versions of the “Arab” and the “American.” The dichotomization between the familiar (Europe, the West) and the strange (the Orient, the East)²³ was reinforced by U.S media, and interestingly enough by the immigrant community themselves in an attempt to distance themselves from the very media outlets that seek to define them. This leads to an intensification of culture by diasporic communities in North America due to this East versus West, Islamophobic, post 9-11 discourse. Arab cultures²⁴ in North America then become more culturally conservative and religiously stringent, more so than their counterparts in their homeland. Nadine Naber recounts that many of her neighbors in San Francisco had more socially conservative understandings of religion, family, gender and sexuality than their counterparts in Jordan,²⁵ an experience I can attest and relate to within my own experience growing up in the Egyptian community in the diaspora of Canada. This conflict has to do with issues of culture and hybridity, their intersection, and how diasporic subjects *articulate* culture. What I argue, is that given the importance of lived experience and first hand accounts within sociological studies of expatriation, portraits

²² Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Christine Naber, *Arab & Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, & Belonging*, 1st ed. ed. (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2011).; Nadine Naber, "Decolonizing Culture: Beyond Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist Femanisms." in *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence and Belonging.* , eds. Rabab Abdulhadi, Evelyn Alsultany and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press., 2011), 78.

²³ Ibid. Page 81.

²⁴ This is not only specific to Arab communities, but other immigrant communities also function within a similar paradigm when outside of their homeland.

²⁵ Ibid. Page 81

such as those of Youssef Nabil's lend themselves to understanding the transnational experience, and illuminate how culture and nationalism are articulated by the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America. The artworks of Youssef Nabil provide an exceptional case study to understand how culture and identity is navigated through political art production, and how art is used as a means of necessity, and a tool of self-actualization.

The question we need to ask then is how we can work through this predicament of identity without re-inscribing the neo-colonialism of Western gay identity, and ultimately reproducing Orientalist understandings of the East and West divide. How can we work past these harmful representations of trauma, but still reflect the real lived pain experienced by gay transnational subjects? And how can we move towards the possibility for non-viable subjects to become viable, and eventually move towards a place of healing? As Judith Butler theorizes about imperialism and international human rights law, she writes that certain lives are not considered lives at all, that they cannot be humanized; their dehumanization occurs at a level that gives rise to a physical violence, delivering the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.²⁶ This is how we can begin to define unviable and viable identities; dehumanization lies within the new-Orientalist understanding of Arab sexualities within the strict parameters of being sexually stringent and lacking to the sexual models of the West. It is at this site of negation— negation of the local sexual narratives that existed long before contact with the West, negation of models of homosociality that exist today and function within their

²⁶ Butler, Judith. "Violence, Mourning, Politics," *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Page 34

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

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

Overall, gay Arab societies have existing and more subtle networks of expressing sexualities and identities, networks that have changed through discourses of Modernity and Western imperialism. What I find from my research is that Modernity's legacy has not yet erased these subtle networks of communications, and in-between subjects are inflicted by adhering to multiple identity narratives from multiple cultural sources. As we see the plight of the Queer Egyptian in *What Have We Done Wrong, Cairo, 1993*, we can interpret this gloom as the colonial pressure of Western homosexuality and the imperialism of a Queer identity category that actively erases culturally specific sexuality

narratives that already existed. With the intimate artworks Nabil takes in Paris, Brooklyn, Harlem, and countless other locations outside of Egypt, it becomes evident how diasporic identity and sexuality can globally portray the culturally specific local narratives of sexuality. In this way, we can see how local sexuality narratives are not passively being colonized by Western Queer discourse, and instead localized understandings of sexualities are being internalized and conceptualized by the diaspora, as seen in Nabil's photographs. With the vulnerable images of Rashid taken in Paris or Ahmed in his djellabah in New York, artworks like that of Youssef Nabil's can contribute to understanding these local identity narratives, and how they manifest themselves in the lives of diasporic subjects globally.

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