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Queens of the Desert: The Digital Practices of Arab MSM

Submitted by:

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to the university of Sussex as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Media
and Cultural Studies

2020

Declaration

I certify that all materials in this thesis that are not my own work have been identified, and that this thesis has not been and will not be submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

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PhD in Media and Cultural Studies
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Abstract

Potential, repression and power have emerged as themes foundational to the academic oeuvre seeking to explore the identities of Arab men who have sex with men (Arab MSM); resulting in cultural and academic conceptions of Arab desiring identities that are orientated in relation to Western formations and critiques.

This thesis intervenes on the field by proposing a ‘third way’ necessary to academic critique that is informed by the lived experiences of Arab MSM living in the Gulf region of the Arabian Peninsula. In our analyses of both qualitative and empirical data, the Arab MSM is centred in the text as we are afforded valuable insight on the rich interiority of our subjects’ lives, and their resultant conceptions of self. By exploring these mediations of self with their identities, practices, gender, politics, and other such articulations within both global and local contexts we move past reductive discursive narratives surrounding conceptions of Arab MSM in the field of post-colonial studies. Thereby capturing a snapshot of how Arab MSM are conceiving of, expressing and inhabiting their personhood today.

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Introduction

Arab Gods

American Gods is a television series adapted from a fantasy novella written by Neil Gaiman, which began airing on the STARZ cable network in 2017. One episode – ‘Head Full of Snow’ (which aired on the 14th of May of that same year) – included a vignette that I became fixated on early in my PhD research. The episode introduces us to Salim (Omid Abtahi), an Omani salesman who travels to America to meet with a Mr. Blanding. Failing to meet Blanding, he takes a taxi and becomes acquainted with the overworked driver (Mousa Kraish) after hearing him curse in Arabic. Following a conversation about their shared culture and their experiences as outsiders in the West, Salim discovers that the driver is an Ifrit (a mystical figure from Arabic folklore that is also known as the genie) named ‘the Djinn’. Towards the end of the vignette, Salim exits the Djinn’s taxi and then turns back to offer up his room number. We are then shown the two characters taking each other’s hand in an elevator, slowly undressing in the bedroom and proceeding to have sex. As they climax, we see sand erupt from their bodies, transforming them into two moving obsidian statues, and they teleport to a magically starry skied desert where the Djinn fills Salim’s body with CGI fire as they orgasm. The screen then fades to black.

I first saw this scene when I was in the middle of redrafting my first substantial chapter of this thesis: the literature review. I was trying to situate (and cement) my own opinions in relation to the work of titans in the field of Arab Studies, such as Edward Said (1978), Joseph Massad (2007), Noor Al-Qasimi (2011) and Jasbir Puar (2007). Unable to reconcile the conflicting feelings I had towards this scene, I turned to reading fan and critical reactions to the episode, which I was surprised to see were overwhelmingly effusive. Emblematic of these reactions is Oliver Sava’s review of the episode (2017, n.p.) who, writing for Vulture.com, said:

“I’m a firm believer that sex is a valuable storytelling tool for building an intense bond between characters, but it’s not often that we see queer characters get substantial, explicit sex scenes in mainstream media. We see Salim’s erect penis as the djinn penetrates him, first in the small bedroom, and then on the sands of a nighttime [sic] desert, where the wind blows away their flesh to reveal two obsidian statues having sex under the stars. This is sex on an epic scale, and when the djinn finishes, he unleashes a wave of fire that fills Salim’s insides, leaving him forever changed. The sex scene needs to sell the idea that this is a life-

changing experience, and that jump into the desert brings an overwhelming extravagance to the intimate event.”

Wanting to examine my own rebuffering of Sava’s reading, I delved deeper into researching this vignette and came across an interview with showrunner Bryan Fuller conducted by Abraham Riseman (2017, n.p.) for Vulture.com. Discussing the scene, Fuller stated:

“‘We felt like for Salim, as a man coming from a country that throws you off the top of buildings if you’re gay, a blow job in an alley is probably his only sexual experience,’ Fuller said. ‘We felt like the djinn, in this romantic gesture, wanted to give him a more intimate sexual experience. We wanted it to be incredibly visual and gorgeous. We wanted those things not to be lurid, but to be beautiful and captivating and for heterosexuals to watch the love scene between these two men and not go ‘Ew,’ but go, ‘That’s gorgeous.’”

As a final word on this vignette, Fuller added at the end of the interview:

“‘It’s about a communion of sorts,” he said. “I hope there are Middle Eastern young men masturbating to that scene.”’ (ibid.)

Thus, I arrived towards an answer for the conflicting feelings of ambivalence and frustration I experienced when first watching this scene. The impression it left on me as viewer was that the ‘other’ being imagined is not the point. Instead, the objective is the very act of imagining this ‘other’; and subsequently subsuming them into existing cultural understandings of both ‘Arabness’ and ‘Queerness’ – and the ways in which those two identities are allowed to intersect.

Intentions

The perspectives coded into this vignette stands directly in opposition to the aims that sparked the very formulation of my research. The frustration it provoked in me was borne out of a pattern of discourse that, I will go on to argue, orientalises Arab same-sex desiring people by erasing the specificity of their varied and significant - (and at times mundane) – experiences and identities. This thesis recontextualises scholastic and cultural discourses about Arab same-sex desiring people by reflecting on our subjects' understandings of themselves and each other as they mediate with a convergence of cultural systems. Ultimately, I have sought to question what it means to exist as 'Arab' and 'same-sex desiring' in the Arabian Gulf region today. Regarding the specificity of my scope, in a later chapter titled 'Mapping Media', I will demonstrate the socio-economic, legal and political factors linking the cultural development of Arab people in these countries.

In what follows, I will provide information on the key research questions that underpin my research, together with a brief explanation of the critical motivations of asking such questions. I will then move to discuss the methodological approach I developed, together with the ethical implications of conducting such research. By the end of this introductory chapter, I aim to have provided the reader with both a sense of the ideas and arguments that pushed me towards pursuing this research, and an understanding of the shape of the ensuing thesis.

Throughout these chapters, I have sought to respond to what I now identify as a gap in scholastic and cultural conceptions of Arab same-sex desiring people by focusing on the specificity of their experiences and understandings. As I developed this thesis, I often returned to this fragment of popular culture, and to my own conflicting feelings towards the lineage that birthed it. In many ways the vignette continued to encapsulate the evolving frustrations I found myself coming up against while undertaking this research. However, a commitment to capturing specificity allowed me respond to these frustrations by allowing for particular insight into the configurations of the same-sex desiring

identities currently emerging in the Arabian gulf. Similarly, this commitment to specificity led me to a path that allowed for a deeper investigation of the questions at the core of this thesis.

Underpinning these questions is a consideration of how queer theory has defined and critiqued the gay identity. Hence, the thesis confronts the impact of the Anglo-European gaze upon queer theory and its subsequent yoking to the Western world (Sutton, 2011, pg. 53). An understanding and awareness of queer theory's foundational bias is an important aspect of the examinations of this subsequent text, as I seek to contend with these definitions while centring non-Anglo-European Arab identities in relation to discussions of identity and same-sex desire (Sutton, 2011; Boellstroff, 2001).

Consequently, an analytical structure that foregrounds the experiences of those othered via their own narratives, derived from discussions with Arab men who have sex with men (Arab MSM) living in the Arabian Gulf region of the Middle East about their experiences online, helped enable this process of recentring. Recent years have seen a stark increase in social media usage in the Middle East (Radcliffe & Bruni, 2019). Subsequently, Western platforms, and the ways in which these platforms allow for identities to be framed, became accessible to those audiences (Gerbaudo, 2012). For Arab MSM, the recent ubiquity of smartphones has opened up a technological space outside of their own physical environment that allows them to more freely interact. As I will go on to discuss, a key finding that emerges from these discussions is that their interactions with the digital space demonstrates Arab MSM understandings, practices, and identity-making are rooted in an interplay with local contexts. My participants' experiences and discussions stand in opposition to discourse that has affixed the spectre of the West as the predominant influence on the formation of the identities of Arab same-sex desiring people. Therefore, a key question foundational to this thesis asks: *How do academic discussions about Arab MSM identities relate to the lived experiences of Arab MSM today?*

A review of this literature is what led me to contemplate the roles of 'transgression' and 'normativity' in the lives of Arab MSM. While one might be inclined towards reflecting on scholarship that investigates homonormative ideologies, as I will go on to argue in the Literature Review, such work is invested in deliberating the formation of political centres in the West (Rapcewicz, 2015). In response to this, a multitude of postcolonial theorists

have built on Joseph Massad's (2007) work on Arab desire to produce valuable scholarship that examines the influence of Western queer ideology in shaping imaginings of Arab same-sex desiring individuals (Al-Qasimi, 2020; Saleh, 2020; Mikdashi & Puar, 2016; Landry, 2011; Arondekar, 2006). This thesis casts our gaze back on the region to examines the extent with which local identities are emerging in dialogue with this scholarship, while also thinking of how these scholars are conceiving of them.

Another key finding gleaned from my interviews with Arab MSM demonstrates that their anxieties are being localised around questions of 'Arabness'. I discuss in detail those who respond to that tension by situating their desires within conceptions of their Arab identities, and those making an effort to signify their desires as being separate from their overall conceptions of self. Thus, I expound on how this anxiety has resulted in complex Arab MSM relationships to 'Arabness' by writing to answer the following question: *How do the experiences and identifications of Arab MSM living in the Arabian Gulf elucidate the regulatory regimes they exist in?*

Moreover, my concern with Arab MSM identifications and the influence of regulatory regimes fed into another facet of my research: the digital space. I note that the rising popularity of social media and smartphone applications in the Middle East is what allowed me the access to write about these communities of Arab MSM. This popularity enabled me to investigate how the digital space opened up avenues for Arab MSM to find new ways of existing visibly. Indeed, this thesis spends some time detailing the developing ways Arab MSM in the Gulf are interfacing with these platforms in service of their desires. As a result, part of the overarching themes of this writing involves the logging and analysis of the developing new and unexpected interactions with, and on, these platforms. Hence, this thesis is also partly borne out of asking: *How are Arab MSM emerging and understanding each other in relation to the digital space?* My synthesis of this data ultimately posits that their interactions online reshape the very sexual cultures they exist in, resulting in an emerging community of MSM whose performance of the self-online involves consciously negotiating with different conceptions of their Arab identity.

I have thus far attempted to carefully navigate away from overemphasising the spectres of globalism and the West that hang over the discussions of Arab identity and desire I am

outlining in this introduction. However, it would be reductive for this thesis to discuss Arab same-sex desiring individuals and not acknowledge any influence of ‘the West’. While I have thus far made the assertion that the overemphasising of this topic in discourse has often de-centred the subjects being discussed, its enduring relevancy in the everyday life and experiences of Arab MSM should be acknowledged. In my interviews it emerged prominently in conversations that related to the topics of language and utopianism.

Indeed, much has been written about this notion of a global gay identity – wherein a specific and uniformed portrait of the gay man is popularised across the world (Altman, 1996; Jackson, 1998; Boellstorff, 2003). Recent scholarship has discussed how this global identity might be problematically influencing the formation of different same-sex desiring cultures’ self-understandings (Sutton, 2011). The political advances the global gay image has inspired within the realms of advocacy have also been noted and debated (Donham, 1998; Haritaworn et al, 2008), while others have examined the difficulties encountered by non-Western subjects attempting to assume the identity of the global gay man (Murray, 2000; Babb, 2004). The findings of this thesis build on these arguments to suggest Arab MSM responses to Anglo-European definitions of same-sex desiring identities are primarily informed by their existing understandings of their Arab same-sex desiring existences, and potentials. Thereby calling on the reader to question how Arab MSM interactions with this global other might challenge our assumptions of the mark left behind by globalism.

In the vignette described at the beginning of this introduction, the actor playing the character of Salim stares at the naked torso of another Arab man. He speaks a line written by four Non-Arab writers, before being welcomed into a fantasy of an orientalisng gay America via a gust of sand and CGI fire. Salim says: “I wish you could see what I see.” This thesis intervenes on postcolonial discussions of Arab desires by responding to the fictional Salim’s wish. As an Arab MSM myself, the fervour of thought this short vignette inspired in me in 2017, and the conclusions I settled into after, exemplifies the motivations underpinning my undertaking of this research. This thesis brings postcolonial theories of desire to the field by offering representational vignettes beyond the imagined ones typified by Salim and Djinn. Focusing our gaze back on the actual lives of Arab MSM opens a new analytical path towards examining how the people Salim is signifying

are being seen, but more importantly also centring how they are seeing the world around them.

In summary, this thesis sets out to explore the identity configurations of my subjects. It utilises a mixed-methods approach (discussed below) and is organised into 7 subsequent chapters. Following a review of relevant literature, and a discussion of the political, legislative and media landscape of the region, the thesis comprises of four analysis chapters, together with a conclusion that reflects upon the key findings and interventions of this thesis. However, before turning my attention to the critical field in which this research is situated, I first must discuss the methodological approach developed for this work.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

The analytical work of this thesis has been informed by a methodology that employs a qualitative mixed-method approach. Through textual analysis of data gleaned from online participant observation and qualitative semi-structured interviews, I sought to extend the notion of the ‘field’ in recognition of the digital space’s potential to “bring together physically dispersed people, provide a space of communication for socially marginalized groups and serve as a resource for community organizing” (Kuntsman, 2004). The combination of these methods has permitted me to also clarify how my subjects’ experiences in ‘online’ and ‘offline’ spaces feed into their everyday practices, interactions and understandings.

Regarding the online participant observation stage of my research, over a six month period (from January 2018 to June 2018), I focused on three online spaces I found to be highly populated by Arab MSM in the Arabian Gulf: an online forum geared around the discussion of issues related to the experiences of its Arab same-sex desiring userbase of 6,000+ members called Ahwaa, and the geolocative smartphone apps Grindr and Hornet. Jakob Svensson laid out the three data types that can be collected from this kind of research: “Elicited ... archive ... and field notations” (2015, p. 288). In terms of challenges that can arise from this method, Svensson stressed the need to be ethically conscientious. Approval for this thesis’ methods was granted on the 23rd of January 2018 (Reference Number: ER/KNKA20/1). I maintained a robust ethical framework throughout my research by prioritising the safety of the subjects’ I was observing and taking account of my own responsibilities. Hence, during this portion of my fieldwork I was open about my presence in these spaces in the capacity of a researcher. Additionally, I made clear that I would anonymise and withhold of any identifying data that would put the subjects, and the spaces, I am observing at risk while making sure to work within the forum’s guidelines and terms of use (Kozinets, 2011).

This method proved key to the development of my thinking. Due to the forum’s emphasis on maintaining user privacy, observing conversations on the forum offered up a wealth of data about how Arab MSM are interacting with one another in real time - without any pressing concerns about detection. The forum’s advocating of resource sharing and group discussions also enabled me to log patterns emerging in the userbase’s posts, which went

on to inform the questions posed in the interviews that comprised the secondary stage of my fieldwork.

The textual analysis of geolocate apps offered particular insight into emerging discursive patterns and behaviours of the userbase. Using the apps' own interfaces, I was able to change my location to observe Arab MSM users on these apps from within the United Kingdom. I will note that the shifting nature of this software's interface necessitated that I be particular about my process of data collection. Grindr and Hornet utilise a 'scrolling' interface that regularly refreshes the grid of users on the basis of their proximity and online/offline status. Thus, I allocated ten minutes to each GCC country I am focusing on, shifting from the country capitals to rural areas in every five-minute interval. One hour of data was logged in total during that period. This was repeated at a routine schedule at 6 pm, 12am, and 12 pm (GMT+3); on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays between the 20th of January 2018 to the 10th of June 2018.

I collected data at three different intervals to have a wider perspective when going on to analyse these shifting populations. Similarly, I chose these specific days in pursuit of a wider perspective while also accounting for the regions different weekend period - Fridays and Saturdays. This resulted in a total of 52 hours of logged data informing this thesis. The following is a list of the locations I collated data from:

GCC Country	Capital	Rural
Saudi Arabia	Riyadh	Buraydah
Kuwait	Kuwait City	Al-Maqwa
Oman	Muscat	Ibri
Qatar	Doha	Umm Hawta
Bahrain	Manama	Arad
United Arab Emirates	Abu Dhabi	Hatta

Mathew Gagné's (2012) research on gay spaces and social networks made use of similar

methods. He also chose to minimise his presence and interactivity with participants and instead focus on users' profiles and interactions within this space. This provided him with ample material with which to examine 'the ways that connections between queer practices, social relations, self-description, and identity politics are mobilized on the Internet, binding together physical and digital spaces.' (Kuntsman & Al-Qasimi, 2012, p. 9). Despite this however he contends:

“In the long term, this methodology does not provide the opportunity to examine how personal history, preferences, and social milieu affect user engagement with the web site.” (Gagne 2012, p. 120)

In response to the outlined limitations on analysis that observation data posed I chose to extend my fieldwork into a secondary stage. In this second stage of data collection, I conducted 2 qualitative semi-structured interviews with 40 Arab MSM currently living in GCC countries, an initial and a follow up. I posted on profiles set up in the spaces I had been observing asking willing participants to contact me through the platform's messaging systems, while also broadly outlining the goals of this research from text derived from my information sheet. Those that contacted me received a link to readable and downloadable PDF files of my Information Sheet and Consent form, as well as an invitation to ask me any further questions regarding my research, my intentions and the interview process. Those who participated in interviews were comprised of Arab MSM populating the digital spaces I observed, and the Arab MSM social circles they put me in contact with.

I will also note that I advertised my appeal for recruitment in both Arabic and English, and this extended to my managing of language in the interviews themselves. I asked my participants the language they preferred to work in and sought to translate during the transcription any instances of Arabic used as accurately as possible – the Arabic text is also transcribed and features next to all translations in this thesis should a bilingual reader spot a mistranslated error that requires an amendment. I sought to remain actively conscientious of the safety of my participants throughout every stage of my fieldwork. So, when moving into the interview portion of my research (conducted over the period of June 2018 to October 2018), I offered variances on how we may conduct our discussion that prioritised my participants privacy and comfort levels. My interviewees were given the option to answer my questions via Skype and using a VPN that protected both lines of communication. I also encouraged them to use headphones and microphones and to

type out any answers or phrases they felt uncomfortable answering verbally. In all variances of this interview method, I made clear that they have the option to refuse to respond to any question I ask, or topic I touch on, or to end the interview. The participants were also made aware that the audio of the conversation was being recorded, and that this recording was to be destroyed upon the transcription and anonymisation of their responses. The second variance of this method offered the option of having the interview be conducted via mobile text using the secure app Kik, which does not store phone numbers or any identifying information, and the third variance allowed them to respond to questions via emails I created for them specifically for the interview. In the second and third variances I advised the participants to delete any stored records of these interviews from their devices.

This thesis involves researching the lives of human beings and so it is important to highlight where this methodology is ethically situated. Discussions of sexuality, and Arab sexuality in particular, could be considered a sensitive research topic (Clifford, 1984, p. 21-26; Lee, 1993, p. 1-17). As a researcher my legal responsibility is to continue protect my participants' privacy if their 'illegal activities' cannot be classified as: international terrorism, money laundering, engendering of minors or the endangerment of vulnerable adults. None of these practices are within the scope of my research and thus jeopardising me or the anonymity of my research participants. Also, I made it clear to my participants that my understanding of my personal responsibilities to them go beyond the pseudonyms I give them in this subsequent writing. The questions asked in these interviews were based on the information that they were already comfortable with sharing publicly in the digital space and I skipped over topics they made clear they did not want to discuss prior to our conversations. They were also made fully aware of the potential risks for both me as the researcher and them as participant. Elsewhere in this thesis, in Chapter 2: Mapping Media, I discuss in detail the legal contexts that my participants were navigating during this period of research. However, I will note here that there is no legislation in place that targets how individuals in GCC countries privately identify with or discuss their sexual desires, which is the area of my interests. Furthermore, there is currently no legislation in place that aims to limit any individual from discussing their own sexual desires and identities. The participants whose voices thread through this thesis were encouraged to sign the consent form only when they felt fully confident that their safety, and health was safeguarded.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Introduction

Broadly speaking, this thesis aims to examine the digital practices and experiences of Arab MSMs (men who have sex with men) in the Arabian Gulf. In this chapter, I seek to map out the existing literature engaging with the figure of the same-sex desiring Arab to better consider how they may be expanded upon and/or complicated. I also aim to contextualise my own position as the researcher authoring this thesis, while offering up my own perspective on the arguments made by the towering scholars who have helped in shaping the field.

This chapter is primarily structured around the influential writing of two of these aforementioned scholars, Edward Said and Joseph Massad. I start this thesis with an acknowledgement of these two partly due to the fact that their respective seminal works have greatly influenced discussions that touch on the topics Arab desire, experiences and identities within a global landscape. Additionally, I am also interested in examining the continued relevance of their writing in discussions about Arab identities and experiences. In this literature review, I demonstrate Edward Said's continued influence in modern critical renderings of Arab identities in relation to Western Imperialism, before going on to examine the influence of Joseph Massad's extension of Said's framework in specific discussions about Arab same-sex desire and identity. I seek to bring into focus the meanings that are being read into the identifications and experiences of Arab persons, and the subsequent meanings being ascribed by scholars in dialogue with both Said and Massad.

For instance, Noor Al-Qasimi, Jin Haritaworn (with Esra Erdem & Tamsila Tauqir) and Jasbir Puar built upon this discursive infrastructure by re-contextualising the topic of Arab desire in relation to modern globalism and Western power. These authors question how post-9/11 discourses of gay activism, exceptionalism and nativism have impacted cultural conceptions of Arab same-sex desiring identities and experiences. I seek to continue moving this field forward by arguing for the need to contend with the perspectives of the subjects of these texts to fully expand on these arguments, which I go on to do later in this thesis.

This chapter examines the tendency for literature on this subject matter to return to the centring of Western powers and definitions when discussing Arab same-sex desiring identities and experiences. Ultimately, I posit the need for us to open a 'third way' that

moves beyond both Said and Massad's foundational texts; one that recognises that if we do not we will be succumbing to a warped version of the Orientalist impulse that Edward Said originally critiqued.



[Figure 1 GCC Countries]

Before fully delving into this topic, it is necessary to define the terminology that is used in this chapter (and this thesis as a whole). When referring to the subjects at the core of my own work as Arab MSM, I am specifically denoting same-sex desiring persons who identify as men, Arab and originate from the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries in the Arabian Peninsula. I have elected to use the term Arab MSM due to the various ways in which my subjects identified (and identified with) their sexual desires in the interview portion of my research.

Additionally, these six GCC countries (pictured in Figure 1 above) were chosen due to socio-political ties that have established and maintained cultural bonds between the population communities within this region (Al-Zo'by & Baskan, 2014). Outlining some of these ties Amr Hamzawy (2012, pg. 45) writes:

“In accounting for this ‘Gulf uniqueness’, analysts have tended to cite a long list of pacifying factors including high standards of living, the absence of pressing socioeconomic crises, the traditional tribal structure of the society and the benevolent authoritarianism of Gulf monarchies. “

Furthermore, I note the relevant discourses that are not fully explored in this chapter. As previously stated, this thesis is broadly concerned with both the digital practices and experiences of the Arab MSM. However, the following only generally discusses digital media debates such as the online identity, the online space and the queer individual in the online space. These topics will be covered later in the thesis where my fieldwork analysis is being used to frame the discussion.

Said & Influence

“In the spring of 1994, I wrote an afterword for *Orientalism* in which, trying to clarify what I believed I had and had not said, I stressed not only the many discussions that had opened up since my book appeared in 1978, but the ways in which a work about representations of ‘the Orient’ lent itself to increasing misrepresentation and misinterpretation.” – Edward Said

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is a seminal work that helped in reshaping the discourse of postcolonial studies. Indeed, its influences should not be underestimated, as it remains central to discussions of otherness, globalism, and identity. For instance, Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism* (1988) applies the theories of *Orientalism* to focus in on economic histories and their influence on the rise of eurocentrism in the global stage. Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod’s *Orientalism and Middle East Feminist Studies* (2001) serves as an important review of the continued influence of Said to feminist scholarship in Middle East Studies, despite not being a work of feminist scholarship or theory in itself; whereas Lorella Ventura (2016) turns to Said in her critique of Western mainstream interpretations of what has been called the ‘Arab Spring’ and the representations of western democracy as the measure of progress. Said can also be traced through the scholarship of Amr Shalakany (2007), Tom Hastings (2011) and Katerina Dalacoura (2014), all who join many others in the field who found the concepts of *Orientalism* invaluable to examining the fields of sexuality and desire.

When thinking about the influences on Said’s own writing, however, there are two key concepts in need of highlighting - as they continue to figure prominently in postcolonial writing about Arab identities following *Orientalism*. These two key concepts are: Discourse and Power.

Michel Foucault’s specific understanding of discourse is a prominent influence in Said’s writing. Generally speaking, discourse is defined as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them” (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). Foucault is more particular in defining discourse as a social construct that shapes the world, meaning that it is a set of “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972, pg. 49). He holds that it embodies meaning and social relationships, and in doing so “[constituting objects] and in the practice ... [concealing its] own invention” (ibid, pg. 49). Thus, the concept of discourse can be thought of in relation to the concept of power,

he however argues that this relationship is flexible when stating: “discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power” (1981, pg. 101).

The influence of Foucault’s concept of discourse is prominent in Said’s defining of the term ‘Orientalism’:

“Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.” (Said, 1978, pg. 3)

Said suggests that for the Eastern (and Western) individual the discourse of the ‘Orient’ envelopes their understandings of their identities, world and relationships. Moreover, at the time of his writing Said was proposing that the discourse of Orientalism was continually evolving, due to the shifting from older forms of 19th Century colonialism to the modern displays of power by the United States.

Power is where Said and Foucault’s conceptions begin to markedly diverge. Foucault writes of power as being: “Everywhere; not because it embraces power, but because it comes from everywhere” (1976, Pg. 93). As Bart Moore-Gilbert recognises, intentionality is not a feature of Foucault’s concepts of power. He writes that it is conceived as: “an anonymous network of relations which is strategic only insofar as it seeks to maximize itself,” (Pg. 36, B, Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Indeed, Foucault seems dismissive of the idea of power as a force that is consolidated through overt action. Comparing the two theorists’ philosophies, Bart More Gilbert states:

“For Said, by contrast, Western domination of the non-Western world is not some arbitrary phenomenon but a conscious and purposive process governed by the will and intention of individuals as well as by institutional imperatives.” (ibid.)

Said instead aligns with Gramsci’s perspective that power is enacted actively to establish hegemonic dominance of one group over a subordinate class (Gramsci, 1980, pg. 144). He demonstrates this when stating:

“The ‘Orient’, that semi-mythical construct which since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in the late eighteenth century has been made and re-made ... to assert that this is the Orient’s nature, and we must deal with it accordingly.” (Said, 1978, xviii)

We see in Said's position a marriage of Gramsci and Foucault's ideas that allow him to build an argument positing that prevalent Western discourses of the 'Orient' are being shaped by Western strategies of power. He writes:

“the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else: he does this for himself, for the sake of his culture” (ibid, pg. 67).

Ultimately, this leads him to proposing a 'humanist' framework that is concerned with the impact of orientalist work on conceptions of Arab identities (ibid. pg. 878).

As this thesis is concerned with the same-sex sexual identities of Arab men in the GCC region of the Arabian Peninsula, it is important to contextualise the work of a scholar whose shadow looms large over much of the discussions I draw upon throughout this thesis. However, before going on to more specifically map out the ideas he presents, I note my own understanding of Orientalism by quoting Tom Shatz' (2019) summary. He states:

“[T]he aim of Orientalism as a system of representations, sometimes explicit, more often implicit, [is] to produce an Other, the better to secure the stability and supremacy of the Western self... Orientalism, in Said's description, is a discourse of the powerful about the powerless[.]”

On Orientalism

Central to Said's theories is a meditation on the imperial histories of France and Britain. He uses these histories to analyse how Orientalism manifests in literature at the time and contextualises these texts in relation to the world in which they were created and went on to subsequently influence. For instance, when discussing how the Orient features in the respective works of Lord Byron and Victor Hugo he writes:

"The Orient is a form of release, a place of original opportunity" (1978, pg. 167)

Here he is suggesting that the 'Orient' as it was originally conceived is emblematic of Western ambitions. Similarly, when discussing the writing of translator, Edward William Lane, he states:

"The Orientalist can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true ... what he wrote was intended as useful knowledge, not for them, but for Europe and its various disseminative institutions" (ibid, pg. 160).

Said associates the voice of the Orientalist with that of the Empire, thus tying the text to "European ambition [to] rule over the Orient" (ibid. pg. 196). He then builds on this argument to begin addressing the other purpose of his text, which is to consider the legacy of Orientalism as it relates to the political climate at the time of his writing. He states:

"Orientalism has also spread in the United States now that Arab money and resources have added considerable glamour to the traditional 'concern' felt for the strategically important Orient." (ibid, pg. 322)

He expands on this musing when discussing the Iraq war in the 25th edition of the book, suggesting that a discourse of 'new Orientalism' is being enacted by Western powers in the 20th century. Thus, ultimately positing that modern discourses of Orientalism result in political and cultural action that continues to globally impact the lives of Arab people:

"Today bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange oriental peoples [...] Without a well-organised sense that the people over there were not like "us" and didn't appreciate "our" values - the very core of traditional orientalist dogma - there would have been no war." (2003, pg. 20)

Said intends for us to understand Orientalism as a supremacist discourse that actively shapes both Western and the Eastern understandings of their cultural selves - and in doing so constructing Western culture as superior to that which is non-West.

The experiences of Arab MSM sit at the heart of my research. Thus, the legacy of the central arguments of *Orientalism* emerged as vital to my consideration of their negotiations with a rapidly globalising media culture (Semmerling, 2006; Hassan, 2014). Additionally, keeping Said's writing in mind illuminated their everyday mediations with a confluence of identities that I argue are being defined by both those in the West and the East (Boone, 2014).

I have thus far argued that Said's *Orientalism* is a key text that continues to reverberate in academic discussions about Arab persons and culture since its release, but I would be remiss to not acknowledge the pushback and critiques that it has received. Responding to Said's work, Ibn Warraq argues in *Defending The West* that *Orientalism* must be viewed as a product of an anti-Western trend in academia, writing:

“Post-World War II Western intellectuals and leftists were consumed by guilt from the West's colonial past and continuing colonial present, and they wholeheartedly embraced any theory or ideology that voiced or at least seemed to voice the putatively thwarted aspirations of the peoples of the third world. Orientalism came at the precise time when anti-Western rhetoric was at its most shrill and was already being taught at Western universities, and when third-worldism was at its most popular.” (Warraq, 2007, pg. 246)

Here Warraq, with some cynicism, dismisses Said for seemingly reinforcing reductive conceptions of the West and seeking to victimise the East. He argues that the theorist ignores that imperialism is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. However, with this statement Warraq himself ignores the lasting legacy of Western Orientalism on Arab cultures. Additionally, he never engages with Said's arguments about the ways in which modern Western practices can be equated to colonial action - thus casting doubt around the argument being built in his critique.

Hosam Aboul-Ela (2010, pg. 729), on the other hand, is more concerned with the focus of Said's analysis:

“A common complaint about Edward Said's *Orientalism*, by most accounts the foundational text of Postcolonial Studies, has been that its relentless focus on the

western gaze resulted in an inadvertent hyper-objectification of the Arab, who remains at the end of the study an object constructed, controlled, and fully circumscribed by the discourse of Europe and America.”

Daniel Martin Varisco (2008), is more explicit when echoing this critique of the content of *Orientalism*, writing:

“The impact of indigenous Arab, Persian and Turkish newspapers and journals in writing back against cultural as well as political imperialism does not even warrant a sentence in Said’s polemic.” (2008, pg. 148)

Said’s critics suggest that, by primarily focusing on Western texts, he inadvertently disregards the Arab perspectives. However, in Said’s defence, he is clear that his interest is in analysing Orientalism as a Western discourse and not in: “Islamic people as humans nor their history as history” (1978, pg. 87). Nonetheless, I find myself aligning with Aboul-Ela and Varisco’s perspective that Said’s focus ultimately undermines his aims. His reliance on Western perspectives and power does not allow space for the full mapping out of their impact on Arab cultures, or Arab peoples’ negotiations with the conceptions of them Said sketches out in *Orientalism*. I posit that part of the challenge of understanding *Orientalism* as the “Foundational text of postcolonial studies” (Aboul-Ela, 2010, pg. 729) is that it puts us at risk of repeating a pattern that constructs the Arab subject as an object circumscribed by the discourse of Europe and America.

A key concept of my objective of this thesis is to engage with the ways Arab MSM think of themselves in a global media culture. While I acknowledge Said as an important and enduring figure, relying solely on his framework would limit me from fully considering how global structures allow my subjects to articulate and represent themselves – and demonstrating how they are concurrently forced to negotiate with discourses that constrain such articulations. Therefore, this research is committed to centring the experiences and identities of my subjects’ in relation to the discussions in *Orientalism* and the critiques calling for us to engage with its limitations – particularly as engage with discussions of Arab persons and same-sex desire.

Given my stated position in relation to the critiques of *Orientalism* outlined above, it’s important to note work that is informed by Said while seeking to be mindful to avoid the ‘hyper-objectification’ that Aboul-Ela identifies (2010, pg. 729). For instance, Ramy Aly (2015) centres the Arab person’s experience in his research about diasporic Arab identities and their attempts to reclaim Western conceptions of the ‘Orient’. He analyses

art produced by Arab persons living in the West, seeking to foreground the Arabness of their self-conceptions via editorials in *Sharq* magazine (*Sharq* was the first magazine produced by and aiming to represent a British Arab Culture). Aly states (2015, pg. 166):

“I see in them the reflections of ethnonormativity within the context of multiculturalism and the commodification of ethnicity, where the device of (visual) Orientalism is key to imagining and composing a legitimate collective self.”

Aly expands on Said’s writing to assess modern Arab persons’ methods of conforming with the discourse of the Orient. Through interviews with the editor and textual analysis he contends with the weight and relevancy of the ‘Orient’ today, ultimately asserting that there is no true potential for liberation in his subjects’ attempts to reclaim it:

“These visual exchanges should be viewed in relation to the structures of subjection and the power of discourse, the belly dancer and romantic Orientalism are in fact the result of no choice at all” (Aly, 2015, pg. 193)

Aly’s methodology and analysis allows him to put forth an argument that engages with the discourses of Orientalism today as they manifest in *Sharq* magazine’s attempted reclamation of colonialist stereotypes about Arab people and cultures. His writing demonstrates a new way in which we can engage with Said’s text that responds to critiques of Said’s inadvertent hyper-objectification of the Arab. Thus, when Aly moves on to discuss his idea of ‘Arab Melancholia’ as a response to the legacy of cultural Orientalism he invites us to think through it from within the Arab perspective:

“[Which is] the Arab failure to resist Europe or offer an alternative to it.” (ibid. pg. 190).

Aly reads this ‘Arab Melancholia’ in the perspectives of his subjects’ negotiations with both their diasporic identities and the legacy of Western colonial actions on their lives as Arab people in the United Kingdom today. While I take some issue with this reading due to his lack of direct engagement with the Arabs in the editorial images analysed, I note the value of following his example when attempting re-orient our engagement with *Orientalism* in my own work.

Elsewhere, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s (2003) work is also notable for its engagement with Arab understandings of the imagined Orient Said has sketched out. She does so by examining the ways in which literature produced by Arab women is operating in dialogue with their cultural identities. Golley suggests that postcolonial discourses alone are

limited when considering specific experiences, as it limits possible interpretations of the perspectives they are putting forth in these women's writings (Golley, 2003, pg. 3). Instead, Golley engages with discourses of feminism, Marxism and Orientalism in relation to the modern writings of Arab women to argue that their calls for change need to be viewed equally to those of woman writing outside of the Middle East. Indeed, she builds on Said's legacy by asking questions about her subjects' own articulations of, resistance to and assimilation to identities often being related in discourses of Orientalism.

Similarly, Nadine Naber's *Decolonizing Culture: Beyond Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist Feminisms* (2011) seeks to advance the work sparked by Said's *Orientalism* by engaging with it primarily through a feminist lens. Combining ethnographic research with feminist scholarship enables her to consider the specific everyday experiences of Arab-American women in relation to the legacies of imperialism and colonialism they navigate daily. In doing so, Naber is able to delve deeply into a discussion of Arab-American women's experiences, diasporic identities and Arab cultural identities in America:

“For several years, as I conducted in-depth interviews with teens and twenty-somethings, we shared stories about the norms and expectations of our immigrant communities. Orientalism was at the heart of this struggle.” (2011, pg. 88)

Much like Aly and Golley, Naber's writing approaches Said's text as foundational to mapping out the tactics of power that have resulted in a legacy of discourse that impacts the lives of Arab people today. This scholarship understands that the true subject of Said's text was the West, moving us to reframe his writing to focus in on the Arab people used to demonstrate the lasting influence of his subject's power.

Massad: The Same-Sex Desiring Arab

In the previous section, I examined Said's concept of Orientalism and the influence it has had on discussions of Arab identities, while also recognising some of the limitations of his. In the following, I consider the ways in which scholars have attempted to build on his writing when discussing the Arab same-sex desiring people. I then focus on the work of Joseph Massad, and the implications his theories of Arab same-sex desire have on my own research. This eventually leads me to more recent discussions about Arab identities and same-sex desire, and the ways in which this thesis pushes them forward.

In work contemplating Arab identities, same-sex desire has been framed in a myriad of ways. It has been considered in relation to colonial sexual exploration in literature such as *Arabian Nights* (Burton, 1885), as a tolerated taboo in service of heterosexual identities (Lagrange, 2000), and has been compared to Western experiences and definitions of identity and same-sex desires (Roscoe & Murray, 1997; Kennedy, 2000; Taïa, 2004). Scholarship has also framed same-sex desire as a verboten topic within a homophobic Arab society (Salti, 1997; McCormick, 2006) - with attempts later being made to re-examine this perception and relate this strand of discourse to the pink-washing efforts/tendencies of Western countries and gay liberation groups (Emi, 2011; Dabashi, 2012).

Salma Khadra Jayyusi's (2005) work demonstrates the efforts of recent scholarship seeking to map out a historical account of Arab same-sex desire. Citing ghazal poetry (love poetry) as an example of the long history of male-male desire in this region, she writes:

"Thus, just as we may find mystical or directly pious religious poetry throughout the Arabic-speaking regions, so we find everywhere debauched poetry reflecting a dissolute indifference to Islamic morality. Homosexual poetry was a widespread phenomenon". (2005, pg. 39)

Similarly, Khaled El-Rouayheb (2005) examines ghazal poetry to posit that the imposition of a specifically European morality has shaped contemporary attitudes towards same-sex desire in the Arab region. However, he stresses that these male-centred cultural celebrations of a male beauty should not be conflated or used as evidence of a now forgotten Arab tolerance towards same-sex desiring practices and existences:

“What Islamic law prohibits is sexual intercourse between men ... It may seem natural for modern historians to gloss over the distinction between committing sodomy and expressing passionate love for a youth, and to describe both activities as manifestations of ‘homosexuality.’ But this only goes to show that the term is anachronistic and unhelpful in this particular context.” (El-Rouayheb, 2005, pg. 3)

However, El-Rouayheb does go on to argue that the decline of ghazal poetry in the 19th century can be attributed to the rising influence of the West in the region, and its avowedly repressive approach to homosexuality, which served to (re)shape attitudes toward expressions of same-sex desire (El-Rouayheb, 2005, pg. 9).

Similarly, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod traces the rise of intolerance towards same-sex desire in the Arab region to the establishment of trade links between Eastern and Western countries and the translation of European texts in the 19th century (1963, pg. 21-22). Other scholars such as Wright Jr and Rowson (1997), Ze’evi (2006), Sharma (2009) and Miller (2018) have written in dialogue with Abu-Lughod, El-Rouayheb and Jayyusi when building a narrative based around the tracing of a history of Arab same-sex desire in the literature of another era. However, none of these theorists investigate the relevance of this history of Arab desire to the everyday experiences of same-sex desiring Arabs today, nor do they question what this historical shift in tolerance means for how they are identifying today. The hurdle we face with much of the work is that it attempts to map Arab histories within understandings of same-sex desire ascribed to them by Western discourses. Thus, I argue that they never contend with the implications of this process. Joseph Massad’s (2007) work represents a break in discourse as it builds on both Said’s *Orientalism* and these theorists work by examining with the globalisation of the Western perspective of sexuality. However, to understand Massad we must first place his work within a broader discussion of globalisation.

Globalisation

The topic of sexuality and globalisation invariably leads me to Dennis Altman and his discussion of queer globalisation. Altman (1997 pg. 419), posits that due to increased globalisation a systemic form of 'queering' is taking place. This leads to same-sex desiring men globally identifying with a western definition of a 'gay identity.' Altman's articulations are in themselves indebted to the work of Ann Ferguson, who sought to confront the imperialistic and neo-colonial implications of such a globalised same-sex desiring identity:

“The very concept of an international lesbian culture is politically problematic, for the most likely model under which it could come into existence is a cultural imperialist one, of Western lesbian liberation movements importing our notions of the proper values for a lesbian culture of resistance onto other societies.” (Ferguson, 1990, pg. 64)

Both Altman and Ferguson conceive of globalised same-sex desiring identities as Western definitions being diffused around the world. The difference in their argument, however, is in how they imagine these identities can be adapted into non-Western cultures. While Ferguson cautions us to be wary of the cultural imperialism inherent in the importing of such definitions, Altman states:

“As homosexual movements develop in non-Western countries they will, in turn, develop identities and lifestyles different to those from which they originally drew their inspiration” (1997 pg. 419).

More recently, Kira Kosnick reframes these concerns with homogeneity to consider the implementation of conservative ethos within our understandings of same-sex communities, she writes:

“It has been argued that neoliberal politics have taken central concerns of sexual politics inspired by the civil rights era such as freedom and liberation and remapped them in terms of privacy, consumption and domestic bliss” (Kosnick, 2015, pg. 693)

I include Kosnick's perspective on the dangers of the modern homogenisation of Western queerness to further emphasise the concerns Ferguson relates in her view of globalising same-sex desiring identities - and thus force us to question if Altman's imagining of the potential development(s) of these identities is perhaps too optimistic. Instead, I find myself arriving at a stalemate when attempting to apply it to the everyday lives and

identities of Arab MSM in the Arabian Peninsula. If the same-sex desiring identities being globalised are being shaped around concerns of ‘privacy, consumption and domestic bliss’ then I find myself thinking of the extent with which my subjects are actually laying claim to these Western identities (as these theorists are defining them), and their purposes for doing so. Rather, I propose that the meaning of these Western definitions is altered when (and if) my subjects lay claim to them - due to their subjectivity when doing so as Arab MSM in the Arabian Gulf. Likewise, I also note the need for us to be wary of erasing the agency of these communities and their negotiations with globalised same-sex desiring identities.

Thus, while I find myself aligning with the politics of Ferguson’s (1990, pg. 64) views regarding the dangers of accepting an ‘international’ understanding of same-sex desire, I also find myself turning to Weeks (1995, pg. 98) who argues that identities need to be constantly reshaped, confronted and reformed ‘especially within the gay world’, particularly in relation to non-Western gay identities navigating a ‘global gay world’. I posit that it is problematic to represent reclamations of Western definitions of same-sex desiring identities as static. Instead, I argue that in these reclamations we see their possible mutability.

Given these theorists work on globalising identities and homogenisation, it is also necessary to think about how we as a result frame the experience same-sex desiring people within their local cultures. First, we must define the concepts that are being discussed. Formally, nationality can be defined as the legal bond between a person and a state (Buabock et al, 2006, pg. 15). However, it has also been associated with civil rights, access to healthcare, political participation, identity and recognition, the common good and the body politic (Liebich, 1995, pg. 27). Calling on Foucault’s concept of ‘biopower’ is also useful when thinking of these discourses. He defines this as being “the diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and control of populations” (1976, pg. 14). As such, it would be prudent for us to consider how the Arab MSM in the Arabian Gulf can be impacted by the diverse ways in which his nation state is able to utilise biopower.

For instance, Foucault writes about the use biopower in Western Europe in the 18th century:

“This was the first time that a society had affirmed, in a constant way, that its future and its fortunes were tied not only to the number and the uprightness of its citizens, to their marriage rules and family organization, but to the manner in which each individual made use of his [...] sex.” (ibid., pg. 26)

Foucault frames Europe in this way to demonstrate the nation state using its biopower to regulate its populations’ sexual activities and cultures. As an example, we could relate this to Gokengin (et al)’s contemporary examination of sexual health in the Arab region. They write:

“Outreach to sex workers, MSM, and PWID is critical... however, reaching these populations is challenging, because their behaviours are considered illicit and very often illegal” (Gokengin et al., 2015)

By recognising the association of access to health with nationality (Liebich, 1995, pg. 27), such writing demonstrates the way in which biopower is impacting its citizens’ symbolic belonging to the nation state (Kosnick, 2016, pg. 18). Sexuality as a marker of belonging has allowed for the creation of both an internal and an external ‘other’ in the Arab region (Goldberg, 2002).

Applying this display of biopower elsewhere, Vera Mackie examines the Indonesian military’s propaganda in the aftermath of an attempted coup in 1965:

“central to this propaganda were allegations that Communist Party women had carried out sexually licentious and sadistic violence.” (Mackie, 2017, pg. 150)

Mackie demonstrates the nation state’s power in affirming the nationalism and belonging of its subject by dividing the population into those that practice ‘good’ or ‘bad’ forms of sexual citizenship (Mackie 2017, Richardson, 2000). With this in mind we see an example of how the reality of Arab MSM’s relation to their national and cultural identities might be complex. Invariably this enables us to consider how they are incorporated into the nation’s body politic as sexual citizens, and how these questions of belonging factor into the formation of their identities as same-sex desiring persons. (Weeks, 1998, pg. 35)

Additionally, it is worth noting on the different class dimensions of citizenship (Marshall 1949) as these matters have been discussed as being mediated by gender (Lister 1997), social tensions (Torres et al. 1999) and sexuality (Evans 1993, Richardson 1998). When building towards a conception of their selfhood, understanding these as issues that Arab men are navigating within their local contexts is as important as recognising them as issues they concurrently navigate within a global context. Richard Phillips (2007, pg. 150)

expands on this in his analysis of Alan Sinfield's work regarding the relationship of power and sexualities, writing: "Sinfield seems to be saying, we must broach more challenging questions about the relationships between sexualities and power." In doing so, he points us to acknowledging the importance of recognising the varied powers being exerted on the formations of same-sex desiring Arabs in both local and global contexts when existing as 'internal others' (Goldberg, 2002).

The topic of globalisation as laid out by the aforementioned theorists opens up many questions, particularly in relation to the applicability of respective notions of globalising queer identities to the lives of Arab MSM communities today. I have sought to emphasise here that same-sex desiring Arab men are navigating issues of belonging, identity and assimilation in both local and global context. Thus, there is a pressing need for us to consider these factors in context of their claiming and understandings their selfhood.

Massad & Desire

Given Joseph Massad's interest in exploring a globalising Western homosexuality, it emerged as necessary for my research to engage with the way in which he frames Arab same-sex practices (and the identities linked to them) to further his arguments.

A student of Said, Joseph Massad (2007) is a scholar whose work is concerned with situating the Arab identity alongside issues of Western imperialism, Orientalism and nationalism. While Said was concerned with the legacy of Western discourse and imperial expansion, Massad sought to apply his framework in *Desiring Arabs* (2007) to probe the effect of colonial discursive regimes on our understandings of Arab same-sex desiring people. In the book, he sought to investigate how understandings of Arab sexual identities and subjects might be considered products of colonial Western power. Through this lens, Massad seeks to highlight 'the consequences of accepting Orientalist taxonomies and judgement' in our conceptions of Arab same-sex desiring subjects (Massad, 2007, pg.29). *Desiring Arabs* (2007) maps out an intellectual history of Arab sexual desire in the 19th and 20th century, as part of Massad's project to write against a 'Western nativism' (ibid. pg. 42). Chakrabarty sees this feature of the theorist's work as stemming from a desire to challenge the practice of using the West as a 'silent referent in historical knowledge' (Chakrabarty, 2007, pg. 28). He develops his argument about these conceptions of same-sex desiring Arab by engaging with the work of scholars that have specifically sought to map out a history of Arab desires. For instance, he frequently refers to the work of El-Rouayheb, discussed previously in this chapter. Massad also analyses primary texts such as travel chronicles that discuss sexual desire. One prominent example is his overview of the chronicles of Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi (1826-30) and Muhammed al-Saffar (1845-46), who, in their writing about Western cultures, were puzzled by the fact that men did not flirt or write love poetry about handsome boys (Massad, 2007, pg. 34). Like El-Rouayheb, Massad cautions against us relating them to what we deem today as 'homosexuality', arguing that such an act would stem from an orientalist impulse.

In a similar vein, we see the theorist rebuffing the concept of a universal understanding of sexuality when in his discussion of modern perspectives on same-sex desire. Massad

argues that a Western influence is evident in the ideological positions established towards desire in art produced by Arab novelists and playwrights, such as Hanan al-Shaykh and Sadallah Wannus (ibid, pg. 335). This brings into focus one of the main features of *Desiring Arabs* (2007). While nowhere in the text does Massad posit an idea of the authentic Arab sexual self, his overall view rests on the notion of a cultural difference that is subsumed by Western power. This is demonstrated when he writes:

“The most successful pedagogy that Orientalism and the colonial encounter would bequeath to these Arab intellectuals was ... an epistemological affinity that would inform all their archaeological efforts. ... Thus, Arab intellectuals accepted the thesis ... and used it to legitimate their own culture production” (2007, pg. 5)

Unlike Said, who thought of the conception of an imagined ‘Orient’ as a tool of colonial power, Massad reworks the idea to reinforce a West/East binary based on an idea of foundational difference. Since the formation of an understanding of sexuality is his concern, he posits that same-sex desiring identities are thus being determined in accordance to rigid Eurocentric hierarchies.

Undeniably, Massad’s thesis is both broad ranging in scope and detailed in its focus. He calls on us to think of the same-sex desiring Arab person within a global context and in doing so builds an engaging and thought-provoking argument throughout *Desiring Arabs*:

“The categories gay and lesbian are not universal at all and can only be universalized by the epistemic, ethical, and political violence unleashed on the rest of the world by the very international human rights advocates whose aim is to defend the very people their intervention is creating” (ibid. pg. 49-50)

In the quote above, we see him conceive of the West as containing the epistemic categories that breed the identities of ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ and the issues of homophobia, heteronormativity and LGBT rights that they carry. However, we should note that the silent contrast here is the East, which is cast through an essentialist framework as lacking the identities and politics of these epistemic categories (Rahman, 2014, pg. 84). This framing allows brings him to a critique of the ‘Gay International’, which he defines as being:

“Organizations dominated by white Western males [that] sprang up to defend the rights of "gays and lesbians" all over the world and to advocate on their behalf.” (Massad, 2007, pg. 361)

He links this Gay International to arguments about the impact of European morality in changing attitudes to same-sex desiring sexualities in the Arab region during the 19th century. Massad argues that the Gay International is embarked on a project of reframing Arabian conceptions of same-sex desiring existences, in the same way as earlier moral imperialism served to reframe understandings of same-sex desire in the Arab region. Thus, forcing modern Arab same-sex desiring individuals to assimilate to Western notions of homosexuality in order to become comprehensible identities, and thereby contorting to fit into an unaccommodating Western system that seeks to understand and cast itself as exceptional. He states:

“The larger mission ... is to liberate Arab and Muslim ‘gays and lesbians’ from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay.” (ibid.)

While Massad is clear about his disinterest in defining identities based on Arab same-sex practices (ibid, pg. 42), he builds a narrative that draws us into doing so through his critique of the Gay International, positioning them as being innately different from their Western counterparts (ibid. pg. 42). Equally, he posits that those claiming these identities are aligning themselves with colonial powers (ibid. pg. 49)

It is important to recognise the critical space that Massad opens up, and the value of the challenge that he offers to a globalised Western conception of homosexuality. However, I note the aforementioned critique that I have aligned myself with when discussing Edward Said’s *Orientalism*: throughout *Desiring Arabs* (2007) Massad is preoccupied with the spectre of the West and relying solely on Massad’s perspective risks problematising the conclusions of my work. A key feature of my research is the engagement with Arab MSM’s own understandings of their identity within a global media discourse. This engagement enables me to challenge the issues of agency and essentialism that are chanced if fully adopting Massad’s views. Indeed, disregarding the subjects’ subjectivity risks perpetuating a reductive critical narrative that casts their understandings as being simply shaped by Western power.

Critiquing Massad's book, Wilson Jacob writes:

"Any critical intervention that seeks 'to resist the attempts by a number of forces to determine and script that future a priori,' must do more than excavate an archive of desire in which that desire is always already defective." (Jacob, 2009, pg. 417)

The issue that Jacob seeks to highlight is Massad's casting of the Arab person as the passive object of desire:

"In the end it becomes a text haunted by those very same demons it sought to cast out, whereby the modern for the Arab subject remains an otherworldly site of desire which can never quite be materialized except as its other in some "undetermined future yet to come" (ibid.)

Julian Awwad (2010, pg. 309) further complicates this facet of some critiques of Massad when stating:

"A postcolonial predicament emerges for human rights work: intervention is problematic because it adopts a universalizing posture and non-intervention overlooks the plight of persecuted same-sex practitioners and renders the state unaccountable for its violations."

The predicament described by Awwad comes across in *Desiring Arabs* due to Massad's adoption of a viewpoint similar to Alonso and Koreck's (1993, pg. 110) who write: "the familiar Anglo categories of sexual orientation—homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual—are culturally specific rather than universal or natural."

Massad extends their critique by reasoning that these definitions are in fact colonial in nature (Massad, 2007, pg. 362). However, one can argue that this conception of same-sex identities is not practical and politically problematic. It disregards those that identify with these categories while existing within the cultural specificity of communities built around the adoption of seemingly Anglo categories.

Indeed, Joseph Boone (2014, pg. xxxi) argues that Massad "create[s] binaries so absolute that one is either totally complicit or totally excluded", meaning that he does not consider the agency of the Arab individual in influencing debates about homosexuality in the region- particularly, the way in which they identify themselves (and others). By thinking

of them as absolutes, Massad prevents his argument from recognising that people might be understanding these definitions in different ways— and the reasons for and implications of their choices. Additionally, this also limits him from addressing the ways in which those that identify as ‘gay Arabs’ might innately challenge Western discourse’s conception of the ‘gay man’ through this act (Rahman, 2010). If Massad (2007, pg. 174) asserts that Arabs that lay claim to Western sexual identities are ‘gay Arab native informants’, then we must recognise that even in doing so they are shifting Western discourses’ conception of the ‘Western gay man’.

Moreover, Massad does not allow us a space to consider the specific ways different societies are adapting to globalisation (Appadurai, 1996, pg. 17), thereby failing to fully engage with its impact on the formation of his subjects’ identities. By not considering the possibility that subjects might be borrowing from Western discourses of homosexuality and reworking them into local cultures, he is unable to convincingly assert his arguments about the tactics of assimilation practiced by gay identifying Arabs (Jackson, 1996).

Finally, Massad does not consider globalising forces other than The Gay International that can influence queer Arab’s lived realities. For instance, he is unable to acknowledge modern perspectives on same-sex sexuality that are being produced by Arabs, who identify with, and express varying forms of, desire, that circulate within the region (Edwards, 2005; Al-Samman 2008). Therefore, Massad is unable to provide a complete picture of the various globalised discourses that same-sex desiring Arabs have to navigate when coming to understand themselves.

The narrative of Arabs identifying with same-sex desires as products of the Gay International complicates the ways in which Massad’s views can be implemented into this project. Relying solely on his views limits me from fully considering the lived experiences of those that lay claim to an Arab same-sex desiring identity, and their agency in adopting these identities (Petzen, 2005). In spite of these shortcomings, *Desiring Arabs* does provide me with a method for recognising the ways in which Western definitions and discourse *can* impact Arab men’s understanding of their identities and sexual practices. Indeed, it highlights the need to start thinking about the specific transnational same-sex desiring identities adopted by my research subjects, and how these identities might compare to Western understandings of these categories.

Reframing the Gay International

Following the path that Massad laid out with *Desiring Arabs*, the challenging of the spectre of a global gay identity has fuelled much work, and as a result has informed much of my thinking while working on this thesis. One such example is Haritaworn, Taquir and Erdem's controversial work in *Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the 'War on Terror'* (2008). These theorists raise many questions that I sought to engage with in this thesis. For instance, their argument that one of the results of the War on Terror is Western culture's laying claim to LGBTQ rights issues as a symbol of their modernity is one that I spent much time ruminating on (Haritaworn et al, 2008, Pg. 86).

They begin their examination but considering how the figure of 'The Orient' features in the German naturalisation test, stating that the test's preoccupation with human rights issues positions Non-Western cultures as 'uncivilised others' (ibid.). They then move on to a discussion that considers the implications of conflating Islam (and by extension Arab people) with homophobia, before focusing in on a critique of Peter Tatchell, the human rights activist. Haritaworn, Taquir and Erdem critique the cultural image of Thatchell as "an expert on gay issues in Muslim countries" (ibid, pg. 77), questioning how such a position allows him to lay claim to "resources and recognition" (ibid. pg. 80). They identify him as a symbol of discursive Islamophobia when writing:

"White people are once again able to identify themselves as the global champions of 'civilisation', 'modernity' and 'development'. Gay Muslims [being] the latest symbol of this identity.'" (Ibid. pg. 78).

Like Massad and Ferguson, the authors seek to highlight the Orientalising tendencies in Western gay rights activist groups. However, they deviate from the aims of *Desiring Arabs* (2007) due to their disinterest in defining Arab gay identities. Instead, they are concerned with how globalisation marginalises these aforementioned identities. They commit themselves to challenging the concept of 'Gay Muslims as victims without agency who cannot represent themselves.' (Ibid. pg. 78), arguing that it is a concept crafted by imperial subjectivities. For the authors, modern Islamophobia is key to the framework by which Western same-sex desiring persons perform imperial action on Arab same-sex desiring persons, and we can trace this argument through Massad's *Desiring Arabs* and back to Said's *Orientalism*.

Haritaworn, Tauqir and Edrem craft an engaging text that pushes forth certain aspects of Massad's Gay International when arguing that Western human rights organisations (and figures) are unequipped to addressing the specific challenges faced by same-sex desiring communities outside the West. With this in mind, it is worth relating their advancement of Massad's text to Samer Habib's critique of *Desiring Arabs* (2010, pg. xviii - xix):

“Massad's criticism, perhaps unwittingly, oppresses those who, against all odds, have [...] initiated local grassroots campaigns for LGBTIQ rights in the Arab world by reducing these initiatives, in academic discourse, to nothing more than agents of Western/imperialist sabotage of Arab nations.”

The harm Habib identifies in discourse concerning imperial subjectivities, as they relate to Arab queers in the region, is their disregard the perspective and agency of same-sex desiring people in the region. Indeed, while Haritaworn (et al)'s argument does allow space for us to consider how their subject's agency being limited, it would have benefited from more fully engaging with Arab responses to what is identified as Western imperialist actions.

Indeed, Awaad (2011, pg. 112) questions the practicality of such discourse on imperial subjectivity and global identities:

“State repression will proceed based on Western-based understandings of homosexuality... who for better or worse, have been co-opted by both the state and the Gay International within the framework of gay rights discourse.”

With the previous in mind, I posit that there are two lines of thinking that recur in the discussions about Arab identities and the West that I have laid out thus far in these chapters: The first is concerned with seeking to understand the way it has defined them, while the second is concerned with how it disregards them. I propose that there is an urgent need for a 'third way' forward that explores the lived experiences of Arab men who negotiate their identities, practices and politics within both global and local contexts. This allows us to question these identities in relation to how they actively respond to Western Imperial actions.

Noor Al Qasimi demonstrates the potential of exploring this 'third way' when looking at examples of Arab queerness in online communities in the United Arab Emirates. Her

research is concerned with investigating how it is tolerated and denied within Emirati cultural and political discourse. In her analysis of online communities, she argues that a: “pan-Gulfian transnational queer imagery is being produced in the context of new social networking technologies such as Facebook.” (Al Qasimi, 2011, pg. 291). She proposes that these identities are being continuously reclaimed and negotiated in relation to their respective cultures:

“The phenomenon of the ‘boyah’ identity [an Arab butch identity] in the Arab Gulf states exemplifies the extent to which cyber technology has ... produced resistant narratives.” (ibid. pg. 289)

While she does not directly engage with her subjects, Al Qasimi’s work demonstrates the potential in employing this framework. She foregoes the impulse to simply critique the influence of Western notions of Queerness on the Arabian region, or reductively focus in on how the states biopower is victimising them. By examining online communities, she is able to consider how her subjects respond to globalised gay identities and their local cultures to map out the specificities of their selfhood in greater detail. Similarly, I believe that this thesis develops this ‘third way’ by allowing us to examine these questions of understanding and selfhood in greater detail. My engagement with the subjects of my study has allowed to me to push forward the work of the theorists in this chapter to more fully interact with the make-up of my subjects’ identities as they exist in the context of the modern day.

“The representation of difference must not be read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorise cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.” (Bhabha 1994, pg. 2)

Central to my conception of this ‘third way’ of understanding our subjects is the need for us to contend with the agency of their negotiations with both global and local contexts. Therefore, it is important to contend with research that has sought to question the negotiations of othered subjects.

Richard Phillips’ writing is interested in thinking about non-Western transnational identities as they relate to international power relations. In his writing, he examines the ways in which Western activist work can be understood as alien when in non-Western

spaces. (2007, pg. 146) Similar to Haritaworn (et al)'s efforts, he positions Peter Tatchell as a figure that is emblematic of the white Western gay male activist and compares his work in Jamaica to the efforts of Jamaican activists (such as JFLAG and Brian Williamson and Steven Harvey). Phillips, however, focuses in on the perspectives of Jamaican activists of Tatchell actions:

“Neither Harvey nor Williamson simply imported western sexuality politics; they developed a specifically Jamaican agenda, organized around the avoidance of and resistance to violence.” (2007, pg. 148)

Phillips' work demonstrates non-Western same-sex desiring persons' negotiations with western based globalising actions and imposition. Throughout his writing he maps out the developing response to the specific issues that are being culturally faced, and the impact of Western queer attitudes on such organising. He suggests that, for those occupying a transnational same-sex desi identity, an investment in the specificity of their cultures is imperative when responding to the issues that are being faced (Phillips 2007, pg. 150).

Critiques of a discourse that focuses on the negotiation of identities argue that it is marked by ambivalence, suggesting that they ultimately conclude with the legitimising of Western actions and attitudes (Farris, 2011) or they alternatively describe growing Western intolerance towards new understandings of redefined selfhood (Pieper and Tsianos, 2011). To refer back to Bhabha's statement regarding the ongoing negotiation that 'authorize cultural hybridities', I reiterate the potential of engaging with these community perspectives and agency. Ignoring their on-going negotiations, with what has thus far been cast as fixed Western modes of being, erases the true specificity of their articulations. (Rose, 1996, 327).

Indeed, from Said, through Massad, and on to Haritaworn, the spectre of Western discourse remains ever present in discussions of same-sex desire in the Arab world. Therefore, I also feel the need to note the ways in which it features in operated in current discursive conversations about Arabs and the West.

Maxime Cervulle observes that the gay Arab man in the modern Western imagination maintains links to Orientalist sexual fantasies, examining the views espoused by the French activist group known as FHAR (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action), he writes:

"The sexual relations between white and Arab men seem to fit the model mapped out by the FHAR – the Arab men are systematically active, preferably aggressive, and decidedly well hung" (2008, pg. 175).

Here Cervulle lays out how the male same-sex desiring Arab body is being conceived as a site for: conquest, othered masculinities, and service to Western desires. Cervulle's suggests that Orientalist imagination has led to the Arab male body being a charged and sexualised figure within the Western imagination.

Jasbir Puar has delved more deeply into this topic when writing about the Arab body as it relates to American identities and ideologies. One might recall Ferguson's (1990, pg. 64) caution about the imperialistic dangers of global queer homogenisations when Puar links conceptions of the Arab body in relation to emerging of hegemonic understandings of American homosexuality. Puar is referencing politicised American queerness with discourses of American jingoism and the subjugation of the Arabs in her terming of 'homonational' when stating that it: "corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of [the] American empire" (2007, pg. 2). She posits that in the United States, queer subjects are moving away from being 'figures of death' (i.e. AIDS epidemic) to becoming tied to ideas of life and productivity (i.e. Gay marriage and lifestyle) (ibid. pg. xii), and that this transition is partly contingent on the parameters of white-racial privilege. This allows for the inclusion of American queerness into the ideals of American exceptionalism that is subsequently disseminated due to globalism. Thus, the queer Arab and the terrorist body become linked:

"Queer Arabs and Muslims [...] are either liberated (and the United States and Europe are often the scene of this liberation) or can only have an irrational, pathological sexuality or queer-ness." (ibid. pg. 13)

Puar's writing on Arab bodies and identities produces some interesting conclusions. However, like Massad, they hinge on the idea that Western forces are in all circumstances occupy the role of the subjugator. It is important for my project to use Puar's theories to explore this idea of subjugation, by engaging with the lived experiences of my subjects to question when same-sex desiring Arabs are complicit with pushing the ideas of Western exceptionalism (and conversely when they resist them). Consequently, it is important that I challenge this framing of Arab people by questioning whether, by excluding the Arab subjects' lived experiences, these theorists are themselves engaging

in an orientalisising erasure of agency that I have thus far been critiquing. Arab identities feature as a tool in this scholarship to once again explore the discourse of the West– the theorists are not using reframing the West to explore its implications on the lived realities of Arab people. Rather, what is being mapped out is Western power.

However, Puar’s writing is invaluable to the broadening of existing discourse about Western conceptions of the Arab individual. Karim Tartoussieh (2013) demonstrates the usefulness of adopting her ideas when trying to understand the ways that Arab persons occupy space within discourses about globalism. For instance, he examines Arab individuals’ interactivity on online Islamic portals that service the Arab-American community and representations of male Arab queerness in pornography. In the first section of his work, he considers the way in which Arab Muslims in the diaspora are building communities online and argues that this is in an effort to help these communities deal with the stigma attached to their ethnicity. Moving on to discuss the queer Arab body, he states that it is crafted as “a “dangerous” body; the only difference is that for the homonormative imaginary this “dangerous” body is desirous and is sanctioned within the realm of sexual fantasy.” (2013, pg. 223) He describes this figure as being the *homoterrorist* and uses it as an example of the stigma experienced by Arab communities online. Tartoussieh concludes by suggesting that the post-9/11 homoerotic interest in the terrorist body: “has had a dehumanizing effect on the Queer Arab American community.” (Ibid. pg. 225) Through his adoption of Puar’s writing, Tartoussieh builds a convincing argument about that the rising presence of Arab communities online in response to cultural narratives dividing America along the lines of race, class, and gender (Elia and Yep 2012; Reddy 2011; Cooper 2004).

Nonetheless, much like my criticism of Puar, the issue I find with Tartoussieh’s theory work is that it does not engage with how Arab subjects can be implicated in pushing these ideals of homonationalism that he adopts. Tartoussieh instead makes use of Puar’s work to discuss a new globalised image of the queer Arab body. The Arabs perpetuating this image become incidental, and instead he focuses on the possible implications of having a Western audience consume it. Serkan Gorkemli’s *‘Coming Out of the Internet’* (2012) demonstrates the issues inherit to Puar and Tartoussieh’s analytical framing. He brings into focus Altman’s writing on globalisation to examine the proliferation of American ideology in imaginings of same-sex desiring identities in Turkey. However, he makes it

a point to highlight that examining the Americanised conceptions occupying Turkish same-sex desiring cultures is not enough. He stresses the need to think about the ways in which Turkish individuals adopt and rework identities in concert with global media flows, writing:

“... as LGBT identities take root in the Middle East, it is important to pay attention to the ongoing co-construction of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as to the role of multiple media, in this process.” (2012, pg. 84)

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this chapter has been to contend with how existing literature has explored the figure of the same-sex desiring Arab person in relation to postcolonial discourses about globalism, and in doing so responding to the conclusions they reach and considering how they correlate to the goals of my research.

As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, Arab identities are a topic that postcolonial discourses have frequently return to. As such they have been discussed in myriad ways, the two most prominent featuring in the two seminal works I structured this chapter around. The first, (Edward Said) analyses the power of the West in fetishising Arab identities (and cultures) in colonial literature, while the second (Joseph Massad) suggests that the legacy of colonial practice is most evident in present day understandings of same-sex desiring Arabs. Though the works of these theorists share many similarities, perhaps the most prominent is in how they have helped to fortify the spectre of West in discussions of Arab identities and desire in academic discourse. I argue that while the paths that they have laid out with their writing have proven to be invaluable to the field, it is time for us to forge another.

The legacy of concern with Western discourse has resulted in the Arab subject being cast as a passive afterthought. It is important for us to question whether their works (and the work of theorists that draw on them, whether directly or indirectly) are in fact now part of the legacy of Orientalism that we seek to dismantle. Indeed, we must question whether this preoccupation with the West results in the reification of the binary imposed by those imperialist powers of the 19th century. Likewise, by not engaging with the Arab subjects directly in our work, we must question if we are simply creating newer Orientalist modes for them to occupy in our conclusions. For instance, the passive Arab at the mercy of Western power (Said, 1978; Puar 2007) or the Gay Arab whose identity is an interpretation of an edifying Western ‘other’ (Massad, 2007; Haritaworn, Et al, 2008.)

It is imperative for us to revise and re-contextualise both *Orientalism* (1978) and *Desiring Arabs* (2007), and, in doing so, question the agency of the same-sex desiring Arab within the issues these works pose. Additionally, we need to move to thinking about Western powers as they are related to Arab identities, in particular asking how they are incorporated, understood and resisted. Similarly, we need to contextualise these identities

and recognise that they are neither static nor insulated, but rather that they exist within a global media discourse. Therefore, allowing us to push us forward to reflect on the impact that simultaneously negotiating with global and local cultures might have on Arab understandings of selfhood and how a new understanding of these global Arab identities might reflect on the arguments posed by this oeuvre of theorists in Arab Studies.

In summary, this chapter tracks and demonstrates the narrative that runs throughout discussions of Arab identities linked to sexual practices. I suggest that we now move away from conceiving of them as passive victims of Western hegemonies and start engaging with them directly in order to understand how they occupy the world today.

Chapter 2: Mapping Media

Introduction

As I have shown in my literature review, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) have set the stage for the topic of same sex desiring Arabs to become a source of passionate global cultural conversations (Boellstroff and Leap, 2004). Thus far in this thesis, I have identified several issues underpinning these texts that I believe warrant our reflection, such as: their attempt to define identities associated with these desires, their attempt to conceive of non-Western same-sex desiring identities in relation to the West's, and their attempt to consider these individuals within the contexts of Arab and non-Arab cultural values (Massad, 2008; Kugle, 2014; Otto, 2017). I have also argued for the need for a 'third way' that actively engages with the experiences of the individuals that are the subjects of our work, due to these discussions being thus far primarily concerned with assessing the influence and globalisation of Western identities and ideology (Hawley and Altman, 2001). This chapter seeks to further push us towards reframing these ongoing conversations by centring the Arab MSM, at the heart of my study, within the cultural context of their region.

I begin with an overview of the legal contexts that directly relate to the how Arab same-sex desiring people operate in the GCC region of the Arabian peninsula, I then move on to discuss the media and cultural landscape of the Arab region as it pertains to representation of same-sex desire and identities.

A recent report by OutRight Action International about media depictions of LGBTQI people in the region found: coverage in journalism was not concerned with incidents of violence against LGBTQ identifying people, hate speech was more likely to be found in online media rather than print media, and nearly half of coverage was concerned with the arrest and detention of LGBTQI identifying people (Saeed, 2017). This overview seeks to dig deeper into the conceptions of Arab same-sex desiring people by taking into account both the historical, by engaging with forms of poetry and live performance, and contemporary, by considering the more recent developments in cinematic, printed and televisual representations of same-sex desire.

By also considering the legal contexts in which same-sex desiring individuals are performing, building and understanding their identities I am able to take into account the attitudes and actions enforced by the state on the subjects of my research. This legal

context enables me to think about the ways in which the state power, briefly discussed in my literature review, pathologizes same-sex desire and codes it as being separate from the national identity. I posit that this sets up same-sex desiring Arab persons as being in binary opposition to locally propagated ideas pertaining to an authentic Arab cultural identity, and I consider the weight that this position might have on my subjects' understanding of their identities. I then move on to a discussion of media to consider the activist reaction to state powers and reflect on the possible influence of this reaction. This allows me to debate its potential in informing the queer individual's own understandings of their sexual identities. Additionally, I turn to non-activist media productions by same-sex desiring Arab individuals to enter into this thesis' engagement with the question of how they incorporate their understandings of their sexuality into their understandings of their 'Arabism' (Phillips, 2013).

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed the homoeroticism that has been read into the ghazal poetry of historical figures like Abu-Nawas, and the Victorian attitudes towards Arab desire in colonial writing about Islamicate cultures. I return to these texts in this chapter to confront the ambiguity with which historical representations of Arab same-sex desire has been represented in scholarly texts. This chapter further expands on this topic while also questioning the relevancy of these historic media texts today. One thing to note is that while the main focus of my research is the GCC countries in the Arabian Gulf region, in this chapter I also turn to both Egypt and Lebanon in my discussion. This is partly due to their historically influential role as media producers within the region. Additionally, as I will explain when discussing organised activism in media, both Egypt and Lebanon have been afforded more cultural visibility in their discussion of related issues related to the experiences of same-sex desiring people in the Arab region. This contrasts the experiences of Arabs in the Arabian Gulf, who are situated within specific legal contexts that have made it necessary for them to operate covertly.

Ultimately, this chapter is intent on exploring the media landscape in which the same-sex desiring Arab exists. My main objective is to map out the cultural and media contexts in which these individuals are operating. Guiding my textual analysis in this chapter is a critical ethnographic lens, as one of my primary foci here is a concern with the power structures that are at play in this region. Positionality is important within the realm of critical ethnography, and Madison stresses the need for positionality, "[b]ecause it forces

us to acknowledge our own power, privilege and biases just as we denounce the power structures that surround our subjects.” (Madison, pg. 16) The fact that I myself am a queer identifying Arab man from the Arabian Gulf writing about same-sex desiring identities in the Arabian Gulf should be highlighted. My own positionality feeds into this chapter (and thesis), and the implication, results, and meanings I read are unlikely to have emerged otherwise.

I believe that by taking my positionality into account when excavating these media artefacts, I have been able to see the specificity of emerging cultural patterns in the region. Indeed, exploring the richness of this complex and specific media history has shed light on the cultural discourses that the Arab MSM I am researching are navigating.

On Digital Theory

One of this thesis’ primary aims is the mapping of Arab MSM identities and experiences as they exist today. To that end, my treatment of digital theory seeks to primarily situate my subjects’ online experiences in relation to work discussing the topics of online identity and performance.

The topic of ‘the online’ is brought in partly due to its prominence in my participants lives, and for the wealth of information that it offers on my subjects’ interactions with other MSM and their general presentations of self (See chapters 4 and 5).

It is perhaps too simplistic to describe work touching on the field of digital cultures and theory as expansive, but that descriptor is also factual. One notable influence on my use of digital theory in this text is the work Erving Goffman who, while not a media scholar, provided a dramaturgical framework in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) of thinking of individuals as actors tailoring their presentation based on audience and context.

Goffman conceived of this as a process of ‘impression management’ that requires both habitual and conscious self-monitoring of how others respond to the presented self, and what changes to the self those responses might illicit. This framework has proven useful and has been explored and complicated by those writing on the topics of identity and presentation in the online space.

For instance, Lewis, Kaufman and Christakis (2008) consider Goffman’s work in relation to the topics of online privacy, Marwick and boyd called upon his theories to complicate the notion of modern online authenticity, and some like Robert Arundale (2010) have

argued that the advancement of technology necessitates that we move beyond Goffman's conceptions of identity performance and his contrasting of 'backstage' and 'frontstage' behaviour (See Goffman, 1959). Others however have also maintained that these technological developments allowed for "perhaps, among the most elaborate examples of impression management that one can imagine" (Jenkins, 2010)

However, in situating my work in relation to these scholars I find myself primarily aligned with Andrea Baker (2009) whose advancement of Goffman's work folded in discussions of blended identities and the online/offline space. Summating her argument Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013, pg. 102) write: "Baker introduces an alternative perspective, through the concept of 'blended identity', whereby the offline-self informs the creation of a new, online-self which then re-informs the offline-self"

What I am interested in is exploring what emerges (and might be exemplified) from the described recursive process of mediation of selves. As John Cheney-Lippold (2017) put forth, it is in this process that we see the potential to "signal a great diversity of who we are and can be, even as different technologies of power desperately try to wrangle us into preexisting [sic] boxes of identity" (2017, pg. 32).

Legal contexts

Identifying the legal approach towards same-sex desire, practice and identities in the region is a necessary to foreground and contextualise the content of the subjects of this thesis. Understanding these contexts provides necessary insight to the possible cultural attitudes that the Arab MSM I am discussing are navigating on a daily basis. This in turn helps aid me in contextualising the discussion of media that follows. These legal classifications shape the kinds of representations that are permitted within the region, and, accordingly, the ones that are sought out and/or rejected by same-sex desiring Arabs in the GCC.

Snapshots of relevant laws and legislature of GCC countries in the Arabian region as of January 2020

Saudi Arabia

Since the founding of the current Saudi Court system in 1932, same-sex sexual activity has been considered illegal for both sexes. First offences are punishable by prison sentences, lashings or execution and second offences are punishable by execution. Regarding freedom of expression, criminal penalties are mainly implemented to punish individuals who directly critique Islam or the royal family (and by extension the government). The internet is heavily censored under antiterrorism and cybercrime laws implemented in 2006, particularly in relation to online advocacy in support for human rights. Websites promoting pro-LGBT content are blocked by a list maintained by the Internet Services Unit (ISU, 2012). However, large numbers of Saudis make use of tools such as proxies to access censored content (Henderson, 2009), although a reluctance to express personal opinions has been reported (Khazen, 1999; Lenze, 2018). The online space, however, remains a place in which the most visible evidence of dissenting opinion and expressions has been documented (ibid.). Still, it is worth noting that there is no documented law barring Saudi MSM from discussing their own same-sex desires or practices in private spaces.

Additionally, there has been some reporting (Greenberg, 2016) of law enforcement in Saudi Arabia using social networking software geared towards same-sex desiring individuals - such as *Grindr* and *Horney*, which is currently restricted in the region but is being accessed by Saudi MSM via VPN phone software (McElroy, 2015) - to lure users seeking same-sex encounters and arresting them under prostitution charges. However, there is no evidence or reporting of local law enforcement monitoring its citizens general online activities in relation to the simple expression of same-sex identities and desires.

It is also worth noting that official numbers of arrests based on sexual activities are seldom publicly shared in the GCC region, due to the drive to deny the existence of same-sex desire in Arab countries (Whitaker, 2007; Dalacoura, 2014). For instance, in early 2018 a statement put out by police in Mecca stated that ‘everyone involved’ was arrested at a Saudi gay wedding, with a point being made to withhold the numbers of people arrested (Makka Region, 2018). This reporting typifies the common way official action is covered by media; details are obscured to minimise the existence of same-sex desiring individuals, and communities, within the population.

Bahrain

Similar to the case of Saudi Arabia, same-sex sexual activity was banned in Bahrain under the Penal Code of the Persian Gulf imposed by the British Contrary in the 19th century. Since its repeal in 1976, same-sex sexual activity has effectively been legalised in Bahrain (Itaborahy & Zhu, 2013.)

However, there are no legal protections against discriminatory practices based on sexuality. For instance, while homosexuality is not illegal, there are no protections against social, economic or other forms of legal proscriptions that afford them the same rights as those identifying and existing as heterosexual Bahraini citizens.

In terms of freedom of speech, and following a resolution issued by the Ministry of Information and Culture in 2009 (Official Gazette, 2009), the Information Affairs Authority has the power to censor the distribution of local and foreign publications, block websites and prosecute individuals. All websites are also required to register with the IAA under the 2002 Telecommunications Law, leading to religious and political content being heavily censored and website administrators being responsible for all content on their site. Freedom of expression is also restricted when critiquing Islam, the king or the government actions. However, there are no laws barring citizens from discussing their sexuality in private.

Due to its comparatively progressive laws Bahrain has been nicknamed the “Las Vegas of the Middle East” (Vriens, 2011). The country’s proximity to Saudi Arabia and Dubai has resulted in making it a destination for same-sex desiring Arab in the region to explore their sexuality, at less risk than if they were to do so in their home countries (Jacobs, 2018). However, attempts have been made to crackdown on this specific sexual tourism phenomenon under the guise of “disruption of peace and public decency” (Toumi, 2018). The reporting in these instances is notable as we once again see a characteristic of the region to deny – and erase - the existence of same-sex desiring individuals, and community, within a country’s own populace. For instance, reporting in the country’s most popular newspaper, *Al Ayam*, about arrests made at a “Gay Party” in 2011 sought to highlight that the individuals detained as non-Bahraini Gulf nationals from outside of Bahrain, either visiting or living in the country (ibid.). I also note that, as of the writing of this text, social networking software geared towards a same-sex desiring userbase (such as *Grindr* and *Hornet*) are not restricted by the government.

Qatar

‘Sodomy’ is considered illegal in Qatar and a person may be prosecuted even if no complaint has been made. Additionally, the penal code was updated in 2004 and article four of this code stipulates that the ‘pimping’ of same-sex acts is punishable by imprisonment for 1-3 years (Sexual Offences Laws, Interpol, 2004). Article 298 specifies that same-sex sex work is punishable by 10 years. This is a change from the previous penal code which stipulated that ‘sodomy’ is punishable with 5 years in prison. Additionally, Qatar operates Sharia courts where Muslim men can be executed for engaging same-sex practices and activities. However, there is no evidence to date indicating that such a punishment has been applied. Rather, recent reporting has indicated that Qatar had a thriving Arab MSM cruising scene, suggesting that the community has taken advantage, and aware, of the fact that laws related to same-sex practice are largely unenforced (Archer, 2015).

Regarding freedom of expression, cybercrime laws implemented in 2014 are vaguely worded and content that undermines the ‘general order’ can be restricted and punished. What this content that might undermining ‘general order’ might be is not specified in the legislature, however, reporting has indicated that Qatari individuals are being penalised for the public expression of views that might be interpreted as seeking to undermining the ruling family (Kamrava, 2013). It is also worth noting that in 2016 Qatar’s first digital news service featured an opinion piece by a man who identified as both gay and Qatari responding to the Pulse Nightclub Orlando shootings. This piece elicited no response from the government. (Al-Qatari, 2016)

Also, I note that as of the writing of this text, social networking software geared towards a same-sex desiring userbase (such as *Grindr* and *Hornet*) are not restricted by the government.

Kuwait

Being caught engaging in same-sex sexual activity is illegal for males in Kuwait and is punishable by up to 7 years imprisonment. There are also no legal protections against discriminatory practices based on sexuality. Freedom of speech is protected under Articles 36 and 37 of the constitution ‘in accordance with the conditions and in the circumstances defined by law.’ In 2014, the government adopted a law creating the

Commission for Mass Communications and Information Technology with regulatory powers over companies that provide phone, internet, cable and satellite services. This commission has the power to censor undesirable content that ‘harms public order’ and to penalise the communication of ‘immoral messages’ through technology. Much like Bahrain, the government’s main concern is regarding comments made about the ruling family (and by extension the government) and those disparaging Islam.

Again, here I note that as of the writing of this text, social networking software geared towards a same-sex desiring userbase (such as Grindr and Hornet) are not restricted by the government, indicating that sexuality is not current a priority for law enforcement. Indeed, Kuwaiti individuals are not barred from freely expressing their views in private discussions on matters related to their own same-sex desires.

Oman

Under Article 33 of the Omani penal code committing sodomy is illegal for males and carries a minimum 3-month prison sentence, which can be extended to 3 years. There are no legal protections against discriminatory practices based on sexuality. However, Omani citizens are not barred from freely expressing their views in private discussions on matters related to their own sexual identifications. I also note that, as of the writing of this text, social networking software geared towards a same-sex desiring userbase (such as Grindr and Hornet) are not restricted by the government.

United Arab Emirates

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in the UAE, and penalties include imprisonment for a minimum period of one year. The death penalty exists but, much like Qatar, there is no evidence indicating that it has been implemented in relation to same-sex activity. Regarding freedom of expression, this is permitted ‘within the limits of the law’ (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Cyber Crime Law implemented in 2012 makes it illegal to “promote disorder, hate, racism or sectarianism and damage the national unity, social peace, public order and public decency’. Activist expression of support for LGBT rights made within the UAE might be deemed a violation of public morality and decency. There are no

limitations on Emiratis discussing same-sex desire in a non-activist context, as laws focus on acting on these desires. However, there has been some unsourced reporting of law enforcement in the UAE using restricted social media software geared towards same-sex desiring people, that are being accessed via VPNs, to lure users seeking same-sex encounters and arresting them under prostitution charges.

It is worth noting however that UAE civil and criminal justice specialists have reported a thriving gay scene in Dubai in particular, while also remarking on the importance of the ethos of discretion in maintaining both the safety and existence of this scene (Boone, 2017). Law enforcement's lack of interest in pursuing cases related to same-sex activity has also been noted by the NGO Detained in Dubai, who state: "Some claim that the police will simply disperse crowds if a gay club is busted" (Detained in Dubai, date not available). This indicates that, despite being under relative risk, there is a thriving and interconnected community finding ways to safely operate within the UAE.

Overview of Legal Contexts

A 2011 study about law and homosexuality in the Arab region found that legislation was generally moralistic, irregularly enacted and at times even contradictory (Patterson, El Feki, & Moalla, 2014). The authors of this study posited that one major issue of note is that, as the onus of sentencing is placed on the judges, arrests and convictions tend to be pursued when the state is seeking to make a show of power and sway public opinion. (ibid.) Elsewhere in this thesis I remarked that work inspired by Edward Said's influential *Orientalism* posits that modern attitudes towards same-sex desire and practice in GCC region can be traced back to attitudes imported from colonial encounters (El-Rouayheb, 2005; Massad, 2007). Reflecting this argument within the contexts of laws and legislature, we can argue that the actions of governmental powers in the Arabian Gulf are indebted to a mixture of colonial and Islamic moralism transposed to the modern day. I would, however, also argue that the language of modern legislature demonstrates that a key concern is in the defining of 'cultural Arab authenticity'. It would behoove us to acknowledge that these laws and attitudes can also be read as a reaction towards colonial fixations with what were once considered permissible displays of same-sex desire in the Arabian region. I would also argue that it moved these states to take tighter control of its

populace's identifications with their 'Arabness' as they stepped into (and continue to occupy a place under) the global spotlight.

As Grewal and Kaplan state:

“If we can argue that historical analysis shows us that concepts of gender difference in medieval China were quite different from those in medieval Islamic culture, we will begin to understand that the legacies of these traditions with attendant identities and practices produce new kinds of subjects in the present moment.” (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001, pg. 667)

In pre-modern times, the main criteria for distinction within the Arab cultures was between licit and illicit sex acts, rather than orientation or identity. Thus, the licit role associated with a man was that of the penetrating partner, whereas the role of the penetrated partner could be occupied by a woman, a boy or a slave. This distinction dictated that when adult men crossed into the role of the 'penetrated' partner their sex acts become illicit (Schmitt 2002; Omar, 2012; Tolino, 2014). Same-sex desiring individuals were legally, and culturally, acknowledged in relation to their sexual behaviour/practice rather than their identity, and we see this being carried forward in the language of legislature effecting Arab same-sex desiring persons today. As I move into directly engaging with the modern identity, understandings and experiences of Arab MSM later on in this thesis, I will demonstrate how this conception of a binary between practice and self is reflected in the importance of the question of 'Arabness' to Arab MSM identities today. (Whitaker, 2006; Luongo, 2007; Popova, 2011; Boone, 2014).

Activist Work and the Nation State

I have thus far proposed that the current legal contexts of the aforementioned countries were crafted by a convergence of cultural attitudes that have ultimately resulted in the idea of the Arab identity being a key source of tension in the region. This tension has resulted in the formation of laws and perspectives that impact the day to day lives of same-sex desiring Arabs. In response to this environment, multiple activist groups have formed and made use of media as a tool key to their efforts to highlight the specific issues faced by Arab same-sex desiring people.

For instance, founded in 2004, the Lebanon-based group, *Helem*, is perhaps the most notable, due to the widespread attention that their activities have garnered both in the Arab world and internationally (Sabry & Ftouni, 2016). The organisation's main mission has been the repeal of Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which punishes 'unnatural sexual intercourse' with imprisonment. This has inspired organisations in the Gulf region to attempt to replicate their tactics of achieving online visibility while also circumnavigating the censorship laws of the region. (Skaf, 2020)

Indeed, Helem has been noted for its model for advocacy, which has been described as a 'grassroots, pragmatic activism that does not merely emulate Western NGOs but fits the unique needs of [the] community in the Arab world.' (Palet, 2017). Over the past few years, they have received press attention in the Arab region for launching a successful campaign to convince reporters to change the language used to describe same-sex desiring individuals from 'shath'/'perversion' to 'mithaly'/'of the same', organising the first LGBT public sit-in in the Arab World and convincing the Lebanese Syndicate of Psychiatry to declare that homosexuality is not a mental health disorder.

However, the organisation has also been met with some push back from other activist groups, and individuals operating within the field of advocacy, primarily for their more recent activities. As Nizar Aoud has stated: "Helem is deteriorating because they are copying Western models and reducing the struggle to issues like health of employment ... without a mature political identity, the movement will not be able to achieve any meaningful impact." (ibid.) Such criticism indicates that despite Helem's stated strategy, there is scepticism as to the way in which they address issues faced by people outside of Lebanon and in the Arab region at large.

Thus, other organisations that have seemingly reacted to this sentiment by generalising their policies to communicate a concern for the rights of all same-sex desiring people in the Arab region. Organisations such as the Human Rights Watch's work in the Arab region, the Gay and Lesbian Arab Society (GLAS), Shams (based in Tunisia), and the Palestinian based Al Qaws and Aswat, all frame their activism within the context of the need to address the 'sameness' of the issues facing all same-sex Arabs (Berthelsen, 2009). For instance, one such concern that has not been addressed by Helem, but by each of the other groups listed above, has been to put an end to the development of a proposed 'homosexuality test' in the Arab Gulf region (Mezzofiore, 2014). However, it is worth

noting that none of these public facing organisations listed are based in the Arabian Gulf region, but rather in parts of the Arab region where there is a degree of relative leniency enabling activists to express open dissent (although we should also acknowledge that Helem's gaining of governmental acknowledgement in 2004 was considered a feat in and of itself. (Palet, 2017)).

There are however a number of organisations and activists that adopted Helem's strategy for covert activism and finding new ways to exist in the region. For instance, Majal (formerly known as MidEast Youth) was founded in 2006 in Bahrain and sustains itself through donations, international grants, awards and fellowships. Their main mission is to: provide open source content to ensure the right to access information for people in the Middle East, to document protest and political dissent, and to push for freedom of expression. In this effort, they launched the Ahwaa forum in 2011, which facilitates safe and private communications between LGBT Arab youth, and currently boasts a user base of around 8000 members. The main objective of this forum is to provide a platform where same-sex desiring Arabs in the Gulf region are able to safely congregate, discuss their experiences and build their communities.

Ahwaa is a collective that exists online, and it is one of the digital spaces in which a large number of LGBT identifying individuals from the Arab Gulf gather to discuss issues related to their rights. On Twitter, @ArabiaLGBT represents a large and prominent Saudi-based organisation that advocates around issues related to same-sex sexuality in the Arabian gulf, while preserving the anonymity of its founders and contributors. Similarly, LGBTRightsUAE is a popular Facebook group which tracks local violations and developments of gay rights in the UAE. They are a group of anonymous citizens who seek to raise awareness about the issues faced by LGBT individuals in the UAE while also serving as a tool to help safeguard them in day to day life.

The lack of a notable and visible LGBT advocacy group organising physical events in the Arab gulf region is something to note, but so are the smaller and covert groups engaging and advocating for Gulf based Arab same-sex desiring communities on the digital space. The digital space being where Gulf based activists are responding to their realities demonstrates that there are newer ways in which Arab same-sex desiring people are managing to organise around the region. The environment in which they are doing this work has resulted in different positionalities informing the development of the advocacy needed.

In short, advocacy by (and for) same-sex desiring people in the Arabian Gulf is responding to the contexts in which they are situated. Same-sex desiring communities have developed methods online that allow them to operate covertly but visibly (to each other) due to the digital interconnectivity of region that boasts with the highest rate of Internet penetration (Simpson & Stewart, 2010). The proficiency with which the government is able to censor online queer media within this region seems to be the major issue, and thus we see that a key concern for these groups have been to find ways to circumvent their censorship safely. The other issue these activists are seeking to address has been the isolation that this censorship has caused for same-sex identifying Arabs in the Gulf (Schaffzin, 2017). Thusly adding further incentive for the development of the online space for community building and for the undermining the nation state's effort to curtail expression.

There have also been notable acts of Arab dissent by same-sex desiring people that have been tied to online media productions. Perhaps the most notable example is the online-based magazine, *My.Kali*. Founded in Jordan in 2007 by a group of university students led by Khalid Abdel-Hadi, *My Kali* was created in response to the lack of an Arab perspective on the LGBT experience and is the first and most popular Arab LGBT magazine created by and for queer Arabs (Gimbel, 2016). Initially English language only, it went on to debut an Arabic language version in 2016, in an effort to push forward its message of queer resistance and visibility across the region. This magazine was preceded by the short-lived pilot zine, created by the Helem organisation in 2005, titled 'Barra' (meaning 'Out'). It sought to provide a platform for LGBT people to discuss issues related to their sexuality, to share art and to advocate for change within Lebanese society. However, there is no evidence that zines similar to this were at any point a popular method of information sharing by people in the region.

Another genre of media object worth mentioning when discussing Arab queer cultural production are video recordings of private queer parties and celebrations. These videos have been mentioned (Banim, 2018) in the context of when they escape the small circles that they were being shared in and cause a mainstream panic. They depict gay men celebrating, discussing their sexualities and often acting out a parody of the pageantry of heterosexual Arab wedding ceremonies. They are spread and shared amongst trusted individuals within the community (Nuri, 2005.) They serve as a document of gatherings

in which these men are able to openly express their sexual desires and discuss the ways in which they mediate between their sexualities and cultures. In their process of doing so, we also see them marrying non-heterosexual identities and their cultural identities in a wilful countering of the aforementioned state efforts to separate the two for Arab same-sex desiring persons. (Phillips, 2013)

Overall the main focus of activist work in the Gulf region is seemingly community building, education and recognition by the state. The shockingly orientalist tone of the following statement aside, John Bradley is correct when suggesting that the lack of public queer cultural artefacts is due to cultural concerns about discretion:

“Who needs the gay ghetto and the equally ghastly dating apps, still less the infantile nonsense that passes for gay cultural expression, when the souks and coffee shops are teeming with charming boys perfectly happy to jump into bed as long as they trust that the next day you will not tell all and sundry what you got up to?” (Bradley, 2017).

Indeed, the need for discretion is paramount in light of the legal contexts and attitudes in the region and this manifests in the ways in which Arab same-sex desiring people are organising and communing. The nature of the online space has opened up this community’s ability to discretely connect with one another. Putting a tool in their hand that enables them to congregate in smaller pockets and to address one another’s concerns in ways that the larger organisations have yet to manage. (Nuri, 2005).

Local Historical Representations of Arab Same-Sex Desire

While representations of Arab same-sex desire are somewhat lacking in the public media available to Arabs living in the region (and researchers interested in their experiences), there are some prominent examples in historical texts.

As previously mentioned, Ottoman era Ghazal poetry has been a source frequently referenced in both scholarly and contemporary mainstream work that attempts to centre the modern-day experiences of same-sex desiring Arab men. In an article for Out.com, Beenish Ahmed interviews LGBTQ identifying Arabs in response to the events of the Pulse night club shootings on the 12th of June 2016. In the article, Ahmed turns to this framing of mystical Islamic poetry to argue that it is a valuable tool in the arsenal of Arab LGBTQ activists today, due to its significance as a historical source. The writer ends his article with this quote from his interview with a gay Arab man named Naveed Merchant:

“That conversation can begin with books, as it did for Merchant.

‘If we’re talking about [homosexuality in Islam] ...let’s not reinvent the wheel,’ he said. ‘Let’s go back into our literature and see that this conversation has been had many, many, many times before. [It is] something that people have talked about in Islam and as Muslims—as ardent Muslims—for a long time.’” (Ahmed, 2016)

Ahmed suggests that these poetic explorations of same-sex desire can serve as a necessary tool for same-sex desiring Arabs seeking to understand themselves, and who are pushing for cultural acceptance of their sexuality. Here Ahmed is pushing for a conception of these Arab subjects as something other than the stereotype of the closeted and repressed homosexual Arab. Thus, allowing him to contrast their narratives to those that have been associated with Pulse shooter Omar Mateen. (Mower, 2016)

“Merchant never felt that his faith was at odds with his sexuality, in part because of a long tradition of accounting for homosexual and homoerotic relationships by the 13th and 14th century Islamic mystical poets Rumi and Hafiz, whose work he was exposed to from an early age.” (Ahmed, 2016)

The overall message of this article demonstrates a trend often encountered in analysis of same-sex desire in Ghazal poetry. Ghazal poetry here is once again being used as a tool to counter Western narratives of Arab cultures as homophobic, and Arab same-sex desire as repressed and unrepresented. (Mare and Leyland, 1993; Massad, 2008; Taïa, 2012;

Khalaf & Gagnon, 2006). I however propose that this argument to attribute modern day homophobia in the Arab region to the colonial encounter problematically imagines it going against an essentialist attitude within the culture (Ahmed 2004; Farooqi, 2012; Dalacoura, 2014; Ahmed; 2016). For example, when mapping out a history of Arab queerness, Nour Abu Assab argues that Abu Nawas' poetry serves as evidence of a past tolerance of same-sex desire in the region. She argues that the modern censorship of Nawas' work in the region should be blamed on attitudes inherited from the colonial encounter:

“Editions of his poetry in 1898 and 1905 before British colonization, included homoerotic verses about love to Ghazal. In the 1937 edition, published during the colonization of the region, the homoerotic verses were removed. The impact of these depictions persists to this day, as colonization created a need to redefine and reconstitute national boundaries ... Historical accounts of the British Empire demonstrate that in times of war, women and sexuality became a site of control, as reproduction and procreation took central stage in regulating bodies within the Empire.” (2017, pg. 31)

She goes on to state:

“In the Arab World, before colonization, there were no laws governing sexuality ... Before colonization, the region was considered a safe haven for men interested in homosexual encounters.” (ibid.)

However, this framing of ghazal poetry as a historical snapshot of attitudes to same-sex desire is difficult, as only a few have attempted to investigate whether this poetry espoused mainstream or dissenting opinions (see Habib, 2010 for discussion). Moreover, the question of the relevance of this poetry is important, as Ghazal poets did not navigate their everyday life as gay identifying men. In addition, there is no evidence that this poetry was regularly consumed by common folk, and was not to the privy of the educated or sovereign elite (as is often the case) (Jarryusi, 1977; Cachia, 2011, pg. 7) Also, there remains legitimate questions about whether they identified their sexual desires with their everyday identities, or if cultural attitudes even influenced their experiences in a way that is similar to same-sex desiring men today. It is important for us to draw a distinction between historical representations same-sex desire and modern Arab sexual identities.

Indeed, as Assab themselves has put forth, the teaching and circulation of this poetry is prohibited in the majority of Islamic countries in the Middle East (Snir, 2006). The people interviewed by Beenish Ahmed, and the writers cited analysing the work, are all Arabs living and writing in Western countries. As such, they are encountering these works from a very specific perspective and experience. Perhaps a more apt question would be: How do same-sex desiring Arabs in Arab countries understand their culture's attitudes towards sexuality in relation to this poetry? And how do they relate to it themselves, if at all? No full investigation of the relevance of this poetry to the lives of modern day same-sex desiring Arabs has thus far been conducted. Therefore, we should question the feasibility and implications of laying claim to such literature as representative sources for same-sex desiring Arabs today, and as evidence of both past and possible cultural attitudes.

This homoerotic poetry consists of recitations of an experience marked by love, wonder and beauty that has its roots in very specific religious and philosophical traditions. A generalised interpretation to how it relates to current, and even past, Arab experiences run the risk of essentialising modes of understanding that simply cannot be generally. There are also the issues of education and access that are not being factored into this thinking. The censorship Assab notes makes these mediums difficult to come by, and thus their relevancy debatable.

Irrespective of the popularity and use of Ghazal poetry, it is worth noting that this (re)establishment of a queer history (through literature and other forms) in the Arab world is similar to what happened throughout the 20th century in the West – primarily by scholars seeking to legitimise the existence of queer folk (See Alan Sinfield's *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading (2005) & Gay and After (1998)*). Elsewhere in this chapter, I have laid out critiques of activist work seeking to echo the patterns of activism in the West - in hopes it would bring progress to same-sex desiring Arabs in the Arabian region. I find myself here aligning with these critiques once again to question the true potentials of these theorists seeking to place modern day Arabs within a literary history. Instead, I question the potential of such efforts in comparison to responding to the work being done by Arabs same-sex desiring people online today to address their more pressing needs (Schaffzin, 2017; Palet, 2017; Sabry & Ftouni, 2016).

Arabs in Drag

Much like poetry, the history of discourse surrounding drag in the Arab region is long and extensive. Some have traced the artform back to the height of the Ottoman Empire by analysing the phenomenon of Kocaks (young male entertainers in female dress (Haynes, 2014). These entertainers were generally comprised of minorities, or non-Muslims, during the Ottoman period, before becoming more popular when ‘Mohammedan prudery did not allow women to dance in public’ (Karayanni, 2006, pg. 78). Though initially they performed in palace circles, they eventually dispersed throughout the Ottoman empire via independent troupes – becoming a popular and common place entertainment form often performing in celebrations, feasts and festivals. Work concerned with tracing cultural attitudes towards these performers is primarily sourced from the recounting of European travellers. For instance, Lady Augusta Hamilton states:

“They are dressed like girls, and accompany words adapted to the purpose, with wanton looks and gestures, which will often so please their employers, that they will almost cover the boys’ faces with ducats, sticking them on with their spittle” (1822, pg. 49)

The above quote demonstrates that these performers were openly seen as sexually desirable figures. Similarly, much analytical work has been undertaken to examine writing about such displays of Arab same-sex desire. For instance, Marjorie Garber (2008) considered cross dressing and drag in relation to the rising tides of Victorian morality and cultural anxiety, Kemal Ozdemir (2000) problematically related these desires to what he perceives to be the innate heterosexual Arab impulses, Karayanni (2006) related the recorded decline of the artform to the influence of Western modernisation in the Arab region, and Ali Gedlik (2017) has questioned what the emergence of the kocak dancer tells us about the position of women in post-Islamic Arab societies. Karayanni (2006) also makes a point of considering these discussions on the history of Arab drag performers in relation to *Orientalism*. He suggests that it is difficult to delve into a discussion on the nature of the desires at play due to the influence of the gaze of the colonial writer:

“The Orient had to become crystallized in the image of the fecund, sexually insatiable woman ... Yet, to acknowledge the male dancer as an emblem would also acknowledge him as a ‘designated repository of sexuality’, in which the Western male tourist was investing his desire.” (ibid. pg. 47.)

Partly due to this gaze, we find ourselves unable to fully speak about the male dancer’s responses or attitudes towards the same-sex desire they were on the receiving end of. Likewise, the prevailing cultural attitudes of the time towards such expressions of desire remain a mystery, as the focus is primarily on the colonial author’s own feelings towards the existence of this desire and their perception of the men the Kocaks were entertaining.

Moving towards more recent example, drag has played an important role within contemporary Arab cinema. The first documented drag performance in Arab film was by Ali Al Kasser in the Egyptian short movie *Al Khala Al Amrikianiya* [The American Aunt] (1920), a film based on the farcical play *Charly’s Aunt*. This served as a precursor to a long tradition of Arab male comedians donning drag in films. This style of comedy became popularised during the Arab ‘golden age of cinema’ by stars such as Abdel Moniem Ibrahim, Adel Imam and Ismail Yasin in films such as *Fael Khair* (*The Benefactor*) (d. Helmy Rafla, 1953) and *Azkiyaa Lakan Aghbiyaa* (*Smart but dumb*) (d. Neyazi Mustafa, 1980) (Sabry, 2012). Drag in contemporary Arab cinema also mainly finds its place in the mainstream within the comedic genre through the work of performers such as Bassem Feghali and Abdulla Malak. (Owen, 2018). Writing about the work of comedic actor Najee Mondalek as his comedic drag character ‘Um Hussein’, Michael Malek Najjar discusses how these drag performances typically function in the genre:

“Mondalek’s character in Um Hussein follows in a long tradition of British and American male actors playing older matriarchs ... These entertainers rely on the notion that a strong female character with agency must be large in stature, have a homely appearance, dress garishly, and have the underlying threat of male violence.... Mondalek’s use of drag in his plays does not destabilize culturally hegemonic ideas about gender or the role of women in Arab/Arab American society.” (2015, pg. 23)

Thus, representations of Arab drag in the mainstream reiterate cultural norms regarding women that ultimately privilege men, and the subversive elements of donning drag is counteracted by the underlying messages of the performance. Additionally, these drag characters are often presented in the form of desexualised matriarchs. This allows a

specific kind of comedic drag to find an acceptable space within the narratives of Arab mainstream media, with desire largely being taken out of the equation.

Looking outside the realm of comedy, it is worth noting forms of Arab drag that stand outside of the mainstream. One prominent example is Rafaat Hattab who gained a considerable following amongst same-sex desiring Arabs online after their politically charged guerrilla style performances as Arous Falestin [The Bride of Palestine].

These performances consist of the 'Arous' in a bloody wedding dress lip-syncing to a politically charged song by the Lebanese singer Fairuz. They proceed to hand out stones to the audience, destroy a picture of the Dome of the Rock and have their dress and the Palestinian flag ripped up by another performer. All of this occurs before Hattab changes outfits and lip-syncs to another song – one that celebrates outsider sexual identities. Rafaat uses drag to explore the complex intersections of their experiences as a same-sex desiring Palestinian person. Writing about Hattab's artistic provocations Farah (2009) argues that the poignancy of the Arous Falestin character is helping the artist amass a considerable following, writing that "Rafaat Hattab contemplates and challenges the expropriation of culture and its symbols, its imprisonment and castration" (Farah, 2009, n.p.)

Despite their popularity, there is little to no coverage of Hattab's work and performances in the mainstream media, this is partly due to their attempt to maintain a sense of anonymity and the political nature of these performances. However, their popularity of among LGBT Arabs online points to an interest in representations reflecting specific and personal subjectivities and the progressive tone of same-sex Arabs producing media about their own experiences. I also note that the anonymity tied with how Hattab operates their guerrilla performances once again speaks to the importance of discretion to how they are ultimately able to explore their Arab same-sex desiring identity publicly.

Televised Same-Sex Desire

While Arab drag is being used as a tool by certain artists to break cultural norms surrounding same-sex desire and gender in the region, they mainly remain the purview of a niche demographic. However, small shifts within the television industry are beginning to make representations of same-sex desire more culturally accessible people in the region. The formation of a sexual identity is a process that involves a continuous interplay between personal values, opinions and understanding, all of which are rooted in a negotiation between local, personal, individual and global values. These global values reach the individual through cinema, television, the Internet, social networks, and the movement of people. (Tolino, pg. 73) When looking at mass media and contemporary Arab sexuality, a good starting point would be to consider the impact of globalisation on television content. The reach of media in recent decades has caused a complex process of contacts and influences, which has likely had an impact on local sexual cultures. This has been identified by Dennis Altman, who writes:

“If by globalization we understand the range of shifts in the social, economic, and cultural spheres which are part of the growing movement of peoples, ideas, trade and money across the world (Held and McGrew 2002; Soros, 2000), the globalization effects sexuality in a number of ways” (2004, pg. 23).

I should note that my conception of globalisation is not intent on implying that understandings of sexuality are simply exported from ‘West’ to the ‘East’. Rather, when discussion Western media in the context of non-Western sexuality I aim to highlight the inelegance of attempting to define a ‘global’ media in relation to a ‘local’ audience. By confronting this tension, we are able to see the way in which the ‘global’ is used by the ‘local’ to create unique meanings:

“Particular subjects in particular localities appropriate and negotiate global, regional and local ‘circuits of knowledge’ in order to construct their sexual identities” (Julienne Corboz, 2009, pg. 4)

Thus, it is pertinent to think about when Western media representations of LGBTQ people were made relatively accessible to Middle Eastern audiences.

Launched in June 1996, Showtime Arabia was a subscription television service available in the Middle East and North African region, and was a joint venture owned 80% by the Kuwait Projects Company (KIPCO) and 20% by US-based Viacom Inc. This service was significant because it introduced a global media player (Viacom) into the Arab media market for the first time. Showtime also entered into the very first alliances between Arab television channels, with the Saudi-based ART, providing bundled multichannel packages using encrypted satellite signals. Showtime became a leader within the Arab media landscape, offering English-language programming, while ART offered Arabic-Language content. (Khalil & Kraidy, 2009, pg. 24) By 2004, and prior to Showtime's merger with the Saudi-owned Orbit Communication Company in 2009, the company moved its base of operations to Dubai Media City citing its 'desire to identify more strongly with the multi-cultural, cosmopolitan subscriber base'. ('Showtime Fully', 2004). This suggests that the demographics being targeted by this service are Western expatriates and high-income Arab families (ibid.). This is further demonstrated when looking at the original package service provided, which included channels such as MTV, E!, Paramount Style, The Disney Channel and TV Land. This slate of programming points towards an Arab audience with some degree of English language proficiency and an interest in Western popular culture.

Due to the imported Western productions being in English, all content on Showtime Arabia (and what is now the Orbit Showtime Network) is subtitled. This has also led to content across the network channel being censored, as transcribed dialogue is altered, and content re-edited for Arab audiences. Popular films and television shows with plotlines that feature non-heterosexual relationships and experiences are often omitted, such as one of the leading character's plotlines in the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997) (The Advocate, 2004). However, allusions to queerness have been allowed to operate through innuendo after a watershed time of 8pm (Khalil & Kraidy, 2009, pg. 111). This is particularly the case for comedic shows. For instance, while *Will & Grace* (1998) includes gay male protagonists, the fact that it operates mostly through camp and innuendo led to the show avoiding heavy censorship when first airing on Showtime Arabia in the Middle Eastern region (and in later rerunning on the Orbit Showtime Network) (ibid.).

Looking to more current contexts, estimates for the penetration of streaming services in the region are steadily growing and heavy investments and competition in the region seem to anticipate its continued growth (Neyra, 2017). Most notably, a lack of regulation has allowed overt representations of content to enter into the region via services such as Netflix and StarzPlay. Netflix's standard catalogue of original productions and acquisitions include shows that overtly depict non-heterosexual sexual practices and identities, in shows such as *Sense8* and *Queer Eye*. This programming is accessible in all of territories where Netflix is present, including Saudi Arabia. I note here however that the only instance of censorship the streaming service complied with in the Arab region was in response to a demand from the Saudi Communication Information Compliance Commission to remove one episode from the series *Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj* due to its focus on the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's involvement with the assassination of Washington Post Journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Likewise, the on-demand streaming service 'StarzPlay's acquisitions include shows featuring plotlines that would certainly be censored and re-edited were they to air on networked tv providers such as OSN (previously known as Showtime Arabia). This had opened up a plethora of media that represents same-sex desire and identities for an Arab viewing audience now able to legally access it.

Examining the role of globalisation in the media landscape of the Arab world is important because it exposes the methods by which Arab media companies reframe Western media representations of LGBTQ people, and the ways in which what is considered 'palatable' is quickly shifting, as services with uncensored content are becoming more popular. (ibid.)

However, we should also acknowledge the fact that these services are only accessible to people who can afford a subscription to these streaming services and the broadband needed to access them. Not every Arab has had access to the queerness put on display in the mediums mentioned.

Same-Sex Desiring Arabs in Film

To return to my earlier discussion of Arab cinema, unlike television, the topics of same-sex desire and identities have been more readily explored when looking at the earlier histories of Arab film. Egyptian films such as *Jenoon El Shabab* [Madness of the youth] (Sherif Hamouda, 1975) and *Also'oud ila Al Haweya* [Climbing to the Edge] (Kamal El-Sheikh, 1978) achieved high circulation figures in the GCC region via mainstream cinema and television re-airings. Indeed, these films have frequently been cited when arguing that the 1970s were a golden age in terms of representing same-sex desire in Arab film (Menicucci, 1998). Reflecting on these depictions, Samar Habib writes:

“Those who do not abide by the laws of compulsory heterosexuality are usually among the ranks of infidels, prostitutes or individuals of considerable wealth and influence to whom laws do not apply – at least this is how the popular imagination tends to represent them in film and literature” (2012, pg. 120)

Habib identifies Salah Abu Seif's controversial *Hammam El-Malatily* [Malatily Bathhouse] (1973) as a rare exception, due to the fact that it represents a gay character named Raouf (Youssef Sha'ban) who does not “get brought back into the norm of heterosexual desires.” (ibid.) Yet, Seif's film operates in familiar ways and delivers a problematic representation of same-sex desire. Raouf's sexual identity is directly tied to his occupation as a sex-worker, and the film at times suggests that this desire is tied to necessity. The narrative also oscillates between various definitions when trying to explain how Raouf identifies. Through Raouf, same-sex desire is coded as predatory, circumstantial, and tragic. Nevertheless, the film is considered revolutionary, not least because it affords the character of Raouf some measure of sympathy through the verbalising of his personal struggles. There are no accounts indicating that Abu Seif faced any threat of censorship concerning the same-sex dimension of the film, and the censors were more concerned with depictions of poverty in Cairo at the time (Hammond, 2017, pg. 86). The film did however face pushback under the presidency of Anwar Sadat, which inspired a wave of Islamic conservatism following the 1973 Yom Kippur War. This led to the retirement, and public donning of the veil, by Shams Al-Baroudi, the lead actress of *Hammam El-Malatily*.

The public reaction to the above-mentioned films in the greater Arab world is also notable. While initially well received and considered classics within the oeuvre of classical Egyptian cinema, the Egyptian period of Islamic religiosity in the 1970s spread far beyond the borders of the country (Hammond, 2017, pg.87). The backlash in this period critiqued the content by stating that their experimentation with Western cinema's visual themes and styles was also leading to the dissemination of Western ideology in the Arab region. *Hammam El-Malatily* is a prominent example of such critiques as it was on the receiving end of a public reassessment of its overt depictions of queerness as being too European. (ibid.) This is emblematic of the struggles of the Arab film industry in of this era. The filmmakers of the time seemed to be attempting to push boundaries, and to show a more sympathetic depiction of non-traditionally conservative identities and stories. (Azodo & Eke, 2007).

Moving on to more modern-day depictions of same-sex desire on screen, we see attempts being made to reframe narratives to showcase the viewpoints of Arab individuals. This is evident in the recent rise in number of documentaries that focus on same-sex desiring Arabs. The most prominent of these are *Out of Iraq* (Chris McKim & Eva Orner, 2016), *Oriented* (Jake Witzenfield, 2015) & *I Am Gay and Muslim* (Chris Belloni, 2012). One thing to note is that with these documentaries, and the majority of recent works like them, only have Arabs as subjects of the film. There are no Arabs involved in other levels of their production, and the films are largely financed by Western production companies, aiming for Western audience, and are shown in international film festivals that feature no involvement from countries in the Arab region. The likelihood of the demographic that serve as the subjects of these documentaries having access to them while living in countries in the Arab region is slim. This is unless, like *Oriented*, they are bought and incorporated into the programming of online streaming services, where they escape censors due to the lack of regulation. This brings into question how the experiences being related are framed, and how they are received by the audiences viewing them (Semmerling, 2010). It can be argued that they align the viewer with an 'outsider gaze' which ultimately serves to reinforce the idea of everything (and everyone) depicted being othered, and thus distancing them from possible same-sex desiring Arab viewers (Sircar & Jain, 2017; Valassopoulos, 2013; Mellor, 2013). Furthermore, these films all tend to explore similar themes; the specific role of masculinity in the family, navigating government surveillance and idealised forbidden romances. There is a specific set of

narratives being crafted around the subjects of these documentaries. These narratives ask the viewer to reflect on and critique the culture surrounding the subjects of the film, rather than focus on the experiences of the individuals being depicted.

Turning our attention to fictional narratives, the most prominent features in recent years are *In Between* (Maysaloun Hamoud, 2016) and *Salvation Army* (Abdellah Taïa, 2013). Both films feature queer characters at the centre of a political coming of age narrative and these films have been noted for their attempt to directly challenge conceptions of Arab cultures and Arab same-sex desire (Kermode, 2017; Weissberg, 2013). They allow their queer characters to exist as actively desiring individuals and showing them navigating their ethnic identities (Sicinski, 2013). With *In Between* in particular, and considering that a fatwa was issued due to the very existence of the film, the film's Israeli funding and distribution adds a further layer that complicates both the accessibility of the film to same-sex desiring Arabs in the Arab region and their ability to identify with the stories being depicted (Hoffman, 2018).

One important point to note here is the lack of any mention of Gulf Cinema. Mainly government funded, the preoccupation of filmmakers in this small market is with family social dramas. All possible allusions of same-sex desire and non-heterosexual identities are censored (Fahim, 2017), resulting in a massive gap in the representation of same-sex desiring Arab men who originate from the Gulf region. Stories about same-sex desire are not being funded or produced by filmmakers in the Gulf region, as they continue needing to work within the confines of the moral codes laid out by the state.

Conclusion

To reiterate a statement made in my introduction, this chapter has sought to map out the media landscape that the same-sex desiring Arabs at the heart of my study exists within. As I have shown, there is a rich history of depictions of same-sex desire in Arab media and in pushing for an analytical third way that centres subjectivity it is important for us to reflect on the contexts that our subjects occupy. To summarise the current cultural narratives, I turn to the report by OutRight Action international that I mentioned in my introduction. This report similarly attempted to map out discussions of Sexuality and Gender identity in Arab Mass Media from 2014 to 2017. The report monitored local and national newspapers, radio, television and social media in 14 countries in the Arab region, assessing language used when talking about same-sex desiring Arabs.

The overall findings of the report state that: “the region often use[s] derogatory terms that perpetuate homophobia and transphobia and reflect a wider poor human rights culture in the region” (Saeed, 2017), attributing these attitudes to the influence of religious doctrine and disseminated medical fallacies. Researcher Nazeeha Saeed also sought to highlight instances when coverage broke from the aforementioned pattern. Stating that neutral terminology was used when referencing the sexuality identities of non-Arab public figures, demonstrating that once again national identity plays an important factor in the way in which same-sex desire and identities are being conceived and discussed by Arab people in the Arab region. (ibid, pg. 23)

The narratives of national identity as it is associated with same-sex desire play a role in the public images of actor Amin El Gamal and drag artist Amrou Al Kadhi. Much of the public discussion around Amin El Gamal focuses on him as an out Egyptian gay identifying man, and he makes an effort to contend with his role as a representational figure for other same-sex desiring men from the Arab region. Speaking to the Advocate in 2017, he stated that:

“If I can’t be true to who I am and set an example for other queer kids who come from an Arab background, what’s the point?” El Gamal asked. “What’s the point in me being a public figure and trying to be authentic and entertain people if I can’t try to change things a bit?” (Reynolds, 2017)

Likewise, the drag artist, writer and filmmaker, Amrou Al Khadi, uses their work to emphasise the ways in which their Iraqi cultural heritage informs both their embrace of

an Arab queer identity and their art. Writing in an article titled “How drag saved my relationship with my Muslim mother and made me fall in love again with my Arab heritage”, Amrou states:

“Whilst I set out to reject my heritage through the queer art of drag, I’ve ended up falling back in love with it. And though my mother does not accept a large part of who I am, through performing what I love about her on stage, my wounds are healing.” (Al-Khadi, 2016)

It is important that we draw a distinction between the public spaces that each aforementioned figure occupies, as Amrou Khadi is speaking from the perspective of a British-Iraqi claiming their identity in the UK, and Amin El Gamal is Egyptian-American gay man. Each figures’ subjectivity is different, and navigates different degrees of privilege and risk, that feature them paradoxically celebrated for their successes and rejected for their identities within Arab media (Khalife, 2017). However, I bring their perspective into this conclusion to demonstrate that existing as an Arab same-sex desiring person means finding ways to navigate that around your national and ethnic identity.

Thus far in this thesis I have asserted that questions of Arab identity relate heavily to conceptions of sexual identity and desire for Arab people in the region. This chapter has demonstrated that this tension is just as evident in the media landscape that Arab same-sex desiring people navigate and exist within. I have laid out and debated the work of theorists attempting to reclaim a history of same-sex desire in Arab poetry, the actions of state powers seeking to eradicate depictions from the books and screens their citizens sit before, and the blind-spots that have enabled some of these depictions to be made accessible. As I move on to analysing the primary research I have undertaken, I aim for this chapter to highlight the ways in which understandings of same-sex desire continue to figure into the cultural landscape of the region; before moving on to contend with the understandings, identities and practices of the Arab MSM navigating this culture on the daily.

Chapter 3: Men of the House: Masculinity and Arab MSM

Introduction

“Every culture (or group) has implicit standards about the appropriate roles that men must enact to be judged masculine” (Franklin, 1984, p. 130)

Raewyn Connell’s *Gender and Power* (1987) is an oft-cited source in discussions about hegemonic masculinity. Connell reflects on power and the position of men in the societal order – and the patterns of practice by which people engage with that position (Whitaker, 2011; al-Daif & Helfer, 2015). Similar to what has been laid out by Samira Aghacy (2009) when writing about Arab men in particular, definitions of hegemonic masculinity have focused in on attributes such as professional success, physical strength, virility and the power to dominate and control others. However, discussions of masculinity and power did not originate with Connell. In 1976 Robert Brannon wrote about the ‘male role’ as the source of oppressive behaviour by men, and in 1977 Tolson explored expressions of masculinity in relation to class difference. Additionally, Bell Hooks critiqued generalisations regarding gender in academic literature conceptualising power without also acknowledging race and ethnicity (1984).

Power, masculinity and sex have also been a preoccupation for theorists writing about non-heterosexual identities and liberation. Kite & Deaux (1987) conceived of masculinity as a societal ideal used to categorise gay men’s societal power amongst the lower rings of the gender hierarchy. Similarly, Morin and Garfinkle suggested that homophobia is a masculine impulse that springs from the pressures of the hierarchical role of a ‘man’ in society (1978). Such thinking has led many theorists to argue that gay liberation must go hand in hand with the grander project of the toppling of gender normativity (Altman, 1972; Broker, 1976; Mieli 1980; Harry, 1982; Green, 1987).

When this branch of discourse has focused on Arab masculinities in particular, theorists have argued that such masculinities have been similarly shaped by their own cultural contexts. This includes, but is not limited to, the realities of social class, gender, religion, race and geographical location (see, for instance, the work of Harpel, 2010; Inhorn, 2012; Eynde, 2015). With this theoretical oeuvre in mind, a key question that arose in my mind during my research interviews was: How do these men relate to and perform masculinity? As I began parsing out the meanings from my interviewees’ statements, this initial question quickly evolved and gave way to others. The themes that emerged out of my conversations with my 40 participants pulled me towards asking: What emerges from

displays of Arab masculinity that might contextually be understood as ‘lacking’? How do these men’s understandings of their sexual identities relate to their understandings of their gender identity? How do social contexts complicate Arab MSM understandings of each other’s masculinities? Does the legacy of colonialism relate to expressions of non-heterosexual Arab masculinity?

As I mentioned previously, prior research has contended that Arab men endorse norms and behaviours typically associated with traditional heteronormative ideas of masculinity, such as virility, responsibility and assertiveness (Inhorn, 2012; Aghacy, 2009). Research focusing specifically on same-sex desiring Arab men has sought to investigate the context of their cultural environment, casting their conceptions of their own masculinities as being characterised by crisis and sexual fluidity (Whitaker, 2011; al-Daif & Helfer, 2015). The prevailing arguments and discussions Arab men’s masculinity suggest that such gendered identities are primarily formed in relation to the following forces:

- Responsibility towards the family structure.
- Religious philosophies.
- State power.

More recent discussions in the field of Arab studies has taken this legacy of literature on gender and developed a discourse that seeks to define an idea of conventional Arab masculinities (Cervulle & Rees-Roberts, 2009; AbuKhalil, 1997; Amar, 2011). These discussions about hegemonic Arab masculinity are varied but two schools of thought emerge as the most prominent.

Firstly, Arab masculinity has been often thought of in relation to the region’s dominant religion (Fedeles, 2013). These theorists have argued that Islam serves as a barometer with which to judge Arab men’s performances of an Arab manhood, and that it influences the threats that arise when these performances fail. For instance, As’ad AbuKhalil writes that “[m]ale supremacy is assumed to be an integral part of the faith, nay of the moral obligation of worship.” (1997, pg. 93). He goes on to add:

“The construction of modern masculinity in Western societies was not similar to that in Eastern societies. The rigid lines of separation and distinction between males and females, or between homosexuals and heterosexuals, were lines of qualitative moral designation. Males and heterosexuals represent the ideal social

and natural roles, from the standpoint of established clerical opinion” (ibid, pg. 101)

Within this framework, Arab masculinity is presented as a moral and religious imperative. Theorists such as Durre Conway-Long (2006), Maxime Cervulle and Nick Rees-Roberts (2009), and Scott Kugle and Stephen Hunt (2012) have helped in further developing the tone of this discourse in their work.

The second school of thought conceives of modern Arab same-sex masculinity as a by-product of the ravages of colonialism. This discourse operates as a meta-analysis of literature seeking to comprehend realities that have been erased by ahistorical generalisations. The most prominent examples of this branch of thought are Edward Said and Joseph Massad, whose work to decolonise Arab identities is discussed in detail elsewhere in this thesis. Moreover, as argued by Paul Amar, the main impulse of this field is to highlight assumptions that are being brought into discussions happening today about Arab masculinities:

“Critical approaches to masculinity can easily become incorporated into liberal, colonial, or disciplinary state projects.” (2011, pg. 45)

This attempt to decolonise Arab masculinities is also a prominent feature of the work of theorists conceiving of modern Arab identities in relation to the discourses of sexuality and globalisation. For instance, writing about the depiction of Arab male bodies in Western media in relation to the ‘war on terror’, Jasbir Puar states:

“[The] depiction of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized through the war on terrorism and terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these emasculated bodies always have femininity as their reference point of malfunction and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body – homosexuality, incest, paedophilia, madness and disease. (2005, pg.127)

As laid out by Puar, warped conceptions of Arab masculinity became an integral part of the project of crafting narratives of Western exceptionalism in a post 9/11 socio-political landscape.

The merits of these discussions aside, these two examples highlight how such discussions have consistently thought of Arab masculinities (and Arab same-sex desiring

masculinities) in relation to the oppressive forces surrounding them. That is to say, they have sought to reflect on how masculinity is operating at the macro level of culture, rather than how it is being negotiated at the micro level of the individual and their personal understandings of self.

In this chapter I demonstrate how my purposed analytical ‘third way’ can explore this micro level by considering masculinity in relation to the contemporary lives of Arab MSMs’. I consider how these men deviate from the social scripts being respectively afforded to Arab men and same-sex desiring men and debate the potentials (and pitfalls) of the social ‘code’ that my research subjects indicate is developing for Arab MSM in the Arab Gulf region.

“My friends are girls, I don’t get asked about girlfriends like my brothers and they call me ‘naoom’ [Translation: soft/feminine] but no one talks to me about if I’m gay. They all just treat me like the little kid brother or sister even though I’m 28.[...] There’s [sic] enough people to pass on the family name so I don’t think anyone is that worried about it as long as no guy comes to ask my mother for a dowry.” - Ismail, Kuwait, 28

As Ismail puts forth, Arab MSM are mediating with hegemonic concepts of gender with more nuance than we have thus far afforded them. To return to the quote opening this text, the idea of gender (Arab masculinity in this particular case) as performative is not new. Indeed, performances of hegemonic gender can and have been thought of as a strategy for survival via a series of affectations, repetitions and imitations (Butler, 1990). In this chapter, I consider my subjects’ specific navigations with hegemonic Arab masculinity, in light of their understandings of their lived experiences and identities as Arab MSM. This rumination on instances where my interviewees are actively managing performances of Arab masculinity clarifies the understandings of manhood emerging for these men in the margins.

The ‘Deviant’: Reclaiming & Policing

“I have ‘ana khaneeth we aby akhanthik’¹ written in my profile” [Translation: I am a sissy and I want to fuck you] – Ebrahim, 26, Kuwait

To begin understanding the impact of the statement featured on Ebrahim’s profile, we first must contend with the complex history of the terminology he is employing. The word ‘khaneeth’ originated from Oman and over time has amassed a multitude of complex connotations. Unni Wikan defined those historically termed ‘khanith’ in Arab cultures when writing:

“[The khaneeth] is not allowed to wear the mask, or other female clothing, His clothes are intermediate between male and female: he wears the ankle length tunic of the male, but with the tight waist of the female dress. Male clothing is white, females wear patterned clothes in bright colours, and khaniths wear unpatterned coloured clothes.” (1977, pg. 307)

Reviewing Wikan’s work, Stephen Murry further added to this definition. He pointed out that historically a khaneeth was understood as a same-sex servicing prostitute whose identity was seen as intermediary:

“A [khaneeth] may marry a woman. So long as consummation of the marriage is publicly verified, the groom will be respected as a man” (pg. 278, 1996)

Stephen Murray further expounds on the identity of a man termed ‘khaneeth’, stating:

“In the Omani view ... there are two sexes, two genders, and the expectation of a one-to-one correspondence between sex and gender. Attributes of the [khaneeth] are intermediate between those of men and women, but jurally the [khaneeth] is a man and is referred to with the masculine pronoun. Rather than being a third gender, the [khaneeth] seems to me to be a kind of man.” (165, pg. 1996)

Here Murray’s framing of the khaneeth identity suggests an association with the term ‘Mukhannathun’. Though used interchangeably with the word ‘khaneeth’ in modern Arab cultures to derogatively denote a same-sex desiring man, it originally was seen as a

¹ The word ‘akhanthik’, meaning ‘to have sex with you’, is considered an overtly lewd way of referring to sex in the Arabian Gulf region.

separate and fixed identity (Abdullah, Sarcheshmehpour & Alkali, 2018). Mention of Mukhannathun can be traced to Pre-Islamic and First-Century Islamic societies. When referenced in prophetic Islamic *hadiths*, the word was used to allude to the effeminacy of non-Muslim men, the social elite, and those lacking sexual interest in marriage or procreation (Rowson, 1991). Unlike Khaneeths however, the term Mukhannathun was not originally related to possible non-gender confirming Arab persons and was specifically used to propagate negative stigmas towards the gender performances of some men - and perhaps most importantly to construct them as outsiders within Arab cultures. This stigmatic word was specifically crafted to fold in religious, economic and class tensions and further cement an idea of acceptable Arab masculinities (2008, Hennen, pg. 42).

Due to the similarity of the words Mukhannathun and Khanith, they have often been conflated in the Arab Gulf. Now both words have come to be understood as disparagingly references to same-sex desire, effeminacy, Arab transgender identities, Arab non-binary identities and any other conception of non-cisgender or heterosexual Arab identity (Hennen, 2008; Lloyd & Archer, 2002; Rowson, 1991). The term 'Khaneeth' remains a widespread pejorative that, depending on the context, is used to refer to same-sex desiring Arab men, effeminacy, the role of the receptive partner in same-sex anal intercourse and same-sex sex in and of itself.

Underpinning all of these different pejorative terms is a specifically Arab critique of an Arab masculinity that is being constructed as *failing*. Similar to CJ Pascoe's (2011) writing on the adolescent uses of the word 'fag', the word 'Khaneeth' operates as a tool for enforcing gender conformity through the exploitation of male anxiety (Sweet & DesRoches, 2007; Plummer, 2001; Pascoe, 2005). However, I would also propose that the etymological history of 'khaneeth' suggests that its use today works to convey that the target is not only failing in their performance of an Arab masculinity, but that they are also failing in relation to their culture and ethnicity.

Thus, when Ebrahim claims 'khaneeth' in his presentation of his Arab MSM identity online, the term extends beyond just referencing his sexual desires. Ebrahim's assertion engages with different cultural dynamics, folding in ideas about his masculinity, ethnicity and sexuality into a public performance of a specifically Arab sexual identity.

Following my interview with Ebrahim, I asked my other participants how they relate to the words ‘Mukhannath’ and ‘Khanith’ in follow up interviews. The latter of which elicited the most interesting responses.

“The first time I heard it was when my mom said it to my uncle because he didn’t want to get married.”- Eyad, 33, Qatar

“It has nothing to do with me... I don’t like it. No one gets to call me that even if I’m gay.”- Karim, 23, Qatar

“People say it a lot about my friend ... I don’t hang around him anymore in front of other people” – Hassan, 27, Kuwait

“I don’t cry over it. I mean I don’t like it but it mainly makes me think that I need to watch how I’m acting in front of people before it’s a bigger problem.” – Yasser, 23, Bahrain

In these later interviews, the participants discussing ‘Khanith’ focused in on the negative connotations of the word. As we see in Karim’s statement that he’s ‘*not like that*’ the stigma associated with it continues to linger. Additionally, and recalling Pascoe’s aforementioned writing (2011, 2005), for Hassan and Yasser the word provokes an anxiety that pushes them towards questioning if they are performing an acceptable form of Arab masculinity. These men demonstrate the space that the word seems to currently be occupying space within Arab MSM cultures, I have found that it serves as a tool for the self-policing of gender and sexuality. We can see this evidenced within how it recurs in the homo-social (as Ebrahim demonstrates) and hetero-social spaces (as Yasser demonstrates) these men exist in.

Thus, Ebrahim claiming ‘khaneeth’ as part of his identity within an Arab MSM online space should be understood as significant:

“I want it to be the first thing someone sees [on Grindr] and that I’m not going to change it... I’m going to look and talk this way so let’s get it out of the way at the start.”

Here Ebrahim makes clear what it means to claim ‘khaneeth’ as an identity in the Arab Gulf region, especially within homosocial spaces. He is playing with cultural notions of the word as being a same-sex desiring man who is feminine and typifying a ‘bad form of masculinity’ for the advancement of Arab society (Murray, 2002). Ebrahim seeks to

carve out a new form of masculinity by repositioning himself in relation to the cultural powers underlying the word. In his construction, Arab MSM who see and understand his reclamation of ‘khaneeth’ are worthy of his interaction, and those that are not able to ‘*get it out of the way*’ are not. Through this process, we see that Ebrahim is reworking existing definition of Arab same-sex desiring men to open up potentials for his own understandings of his Arab masculine, sexual and cultural identities.

Ebrahim’s reclamation of the word recalls Robin Brontsema’s writing on the topic:

“Hate speech intended to disable its target simultaneously enables its very resistance; its injurious power is the same fuel that feeds the fire of its counter-appropriation. Laying claim to the forbidden, the word as weapon is taken up and taken back by those it seeks to shackle—a self-emancipation that defies hegemonic linguistic ownership and the (ab)use of power.” (2004, Pg. 1)

Brontsema is writing specifically about the reclamation of the word ‘queer’, they identify three differing perspectives amongst people seeking to reclaim pejorative terminology. To briefly summarise: firstly, seeing the term as inseparable from its pejoration and thus to be opposed; secondly, seeing the term as separable and so its reclamation is supported; and thirdly, seeing the term as inseparable yet still its reclamation is supported. (ibid.) Ebrahim seems to fall into the third category. In my conversation with him he went on to discuss how the word ‘khaneeth’ is used to police his gender in his family home. Thus, his reclamation of it in homosocial online spaces is a self-affirming act consciously working to imbue it with new purpose.

Ebrahim also pushed me towards reflecting on the hitherto unaddressed structure that necessitated his reclamation of ‘Khaneeth’. Woven throughout my interview transcripts are the life histories of men who frequently mention the way in which their gender presentation operates within their family dynamics. Later in this chapter I reflect on the ways in which different family power dynamics have pushed my interviewees to code themselves in more acceptable ways, and to alter presentations that run counter to the whims of societal powers and nation states. Here, however, I focus specifically on the trope of the deviant ‘Khaneeth’ within the family hierarchy. As Ebrahim goes on to say:

“My mother and brothers called me ‘Khaneeth’ when they think I’m acting too soft. It’s to let me know that I need to stop whatever I’m doing...[that] I need to start acting like a man who can be a husband and a father”

In the family space, ‘Khanith’ is a policing term: a corrective measure deployed in response to the perceived subversion of cultural notions about how masculinity and Arab male sexuality is *supposed* to function. ‘Khaneeth’ is meant as a bogeyman for the correcting of the sexual and gender behaviours of effeminate Arab boys (Murray, 2002). The anxiety this term is meant to provoke is evident in all of Ebrahim’s statements about him being a ‘khaneeth’, both in how it is weaponised in his family dynamic and underlying his reclamation of it. This anxiety can be related to discussions about the experiences of white gay men in relation to derogatory language, where research has demonstrated that it pointed towards exclusion and difference as a major concern for their dynamics in the family structure (McKeown, Nelson, et al., 2010, pg. 6). In both instances, claiming the deviant identity becomes an acknowledgment of positive potentials that might exist beyond what is offered in the societal confines of the heteronormative nuclear family.

“‘ana khaneeth we aby atkhanathik’ [is] written in my profile” [Translation: I am a khaneeth and I want to fuck you]”

There is an active dimension in how Ebrahim frames his reclamation of the deviant identity that has been assigned him, and I would propose that he mediates with the form of masculinity that is being demanded by reflecting the aggression of the demand. These self-described ‘Khaneeths’ carve out a new understanding of their masculinity by incorporating rebellion into their self-conceptions. Thus, asserting that their masculinity is at once effeminate, sexual, and Arab.

The ‘Mary’: Westoxication & Power

“I used to wear my sister’s mascara because a boyfriend once told [me] that Arab guys are pretty because they have long eyelashes. I got in trouble with my mother when she noticed. She said she’d pull me out of school because ‘el ajanib ye’adonik ebmankarhum’ [Translation: white foreigners are infecting you with their sin.]” – Latif, 21, Bahrain

Edward Said wrote that the Arabic Orient has come to represent “One [of the West’s] deepest and most recurring images of the Other.” (Said, 1991. Pg. 2). He argued that this otherness has often been gendered as “feminine”, hence it has been said to denote the submissive, sexually available and inferior in the conception of the ‘superior’ patriarchal and colonising Western mind. In Latif’s statement we see the exact same methods being employed, with the Other being set up as the feminine, but this time marking Latif as operating outside the accepted cultural understandings of *Arab* manhood. Latif’s mother calls on an idea of femininity to underline her perception of his sexual and cultural otherness.

“I’m not a sissy but sometimes they slip and say things like ‘iklai’ and not ‘ikil’ [Translation: Feminine form of ‘eat’ rather than the masculine]”

Latif casts doubts on whether his experiences are coloured by his sexuality or gender presentation. However, what cannot be denied is that it is driven by the same heterosexual impulse that is present in the metaphor Said’s laid out (Boone, 2014, pg. 153). What belongs is masculine (though not necessarily male) and what is othered is feminine (though not necessarily female). Notably, Latif’s mother is central to this dynamic. Here she serves as the voice that takes on the role of ‘correcting’ her son’s masculinity.

“She doesn’t like me being around my sisters or having girls who are friends. She says ‘seer rayal’ [translation: become a man/act like a man] a lot.”

The tactics employed by Latif’s mother indicate that she is wielding power that derives from a nationalist ideology linked to the state:

“[she] started calling me Mary whenever she thinks I do something that she thinks is too ‘ajnabi’ [Translation: White and foreign] like listen to English music.”

A form of gendered xenophobia is being deployed here, which reverses the way in which orientalism tends to figure into discussions related to Arab persons. She enacts a ‘reverse orientalism’ when questioning his belonging by targeting the specific form of Arab anxiety around masculinity I mentioned earlier in relation to Ebrahim. This anxiety is of course linked to external, colonial imaginaries of the Arab region, which has historically been read as feminine, sexually fluid and expressive (Massad, 2001, Simmerling, 2010). As Nadine Naber writes:

“Socially coded scripts collide into each other ... the discourse of U.S. Orientalism and its sexually savage Arabs versus sexually civilised ‘Americans’ and the more fluid Arab concepts of sexual acts and desires compared to rigid Eurocentric categories of sexual identity.” (pg. 88, 2012)

However, in a reversal of Naber’s description of colonial scripts, it is the West that is coded by Latif’s mother as sexually fluid, aggressive and threatening. The imagined West in this instance is the feminine, or more specifically, it operates as a feminising force that poses a threat to Arab masculinity – and thus by extension the nation.

Much like orientalism being enacted by imperial and colonial powers, the insight gleaned from focusing in on Latif’s lived experiences reveals a form of ‘reverse orientalism’ is emerging as a method to consolidate power by the nation state and within the family structure. Casting the West as feminine affixes cultural definitions of accepted masculinity and affirms expectations of heterosexuality – and what might be considered heteronormative displays of gender. Latif turns into a ‘Mary’ by not fitting into these expectations.² Thus, if the subtext of weaponised terms like ‘Khaneeth’ is meant to denote a betrayal of Arab masculinity, ‘Mary’ extends the meaning further. Aligning with what is considered feminine is constructed as a betrayal of Arab expectations of male masculinity, and a betrayal of Arab heritage; one that is actively harming the Arab Nation.

Questioning the belonging of same-sex desiring persons is not new (Stella, et al. 2015; Kuntsman, 2008), and has been discussed in relation to its deployment by various state powers and their respective sexual cultures. In their discussion of the tensions that arose out of a proposed Ghanaian conference, Kwame Essien and Saheed Aderinto discussed

²1 note that ‘Mary’ in this case is being employed as a general ‘foreign’ name, rather than being a name used to denoting same-sex desire in MSMs in the west. (Partridge, 2006).

how same-sex desire was being linked to an idea of Western “sexual colonialism” (2009).

They state:

“The Ghanaian government, just as its Zimbabwean, Kenyan and Ugandan counterparts, and also religious institutions, largely perceive homosexuality as another form of Western cultural infiltration and imperialism. They clamoured for the preservation of heterosexuality as the only form of African sexuality while amplifying the implication of same-sex affairs on the conventional family and marriage system, generational continuity, and religious values.” (ibid. pg. 122)

Similar to the weaponised construction of the Western feminine by Latif’s mother, what is striking about Essien and Aderinto’s writing here is the intentionality underlying the idea of same-sex desire as a cultural ‘infiltrator’. Through this framework, the same-sex person is demonised by the nation, while the cultural history of the continent is reimagined as the ultimate cis-hetero patriarchal utopia.

This idea of Western ‘sexual colonialism’ (ibid.) is a tactic used to police sexual cultures both socially and legislatively. Andrew Yip’s analysis of the power of family and kinship in British South Asian non-heterosexual Muslim communities touches on similar themes.

He writes:

“The British Muslim community prides itself on its close-knit family and kinship network, which generates high cultural expectation of integration and conformity... the dominant discourse of homosexuality is inextricably linked to their religious/ethnic minority social position. This constructs homosexuality as an appendage of the permissive and immoral western ‘other’. To be homosexual and Muslim, therefore, is being a victim of ‘westoxication’” (2004, pg. 338-340)

Here termed ‘westoxication’, the suggestion is that same-sex desire is a result of the exploitations of secular western cultures. We should note that that the culture being examined by Yip is in a minority social position in the United Kingdom. Therefore, ‘westoxication’ is a tactic that is being used to establish and ‘preserve’ cultural boundaries within the West. In contrast, men like Latif are being policed by a culture that is seeking to solidify its power. Hence, while Andrew Yip’s subjects are falling victim to westoxication as a result of their surroundings, for Latif and other Arab MSM, they are positioned as a threat.

Work undertaken to examine this perception of same-sex desire as a ‘Western disease’ by non-Western cultures tends to discuss it in terms that think of same-sex desiring

persons as a collective that is othered (Johnson, 2001; Yip, 2003). Latif's experience, on the other hand, is symbolic of this tactic when it is more specifically targeting individuals. He points us towards the need to start thinking about these individual, domestic experiences, thereby contending with how the nuances of same-sex desiring masculinities provoke interactions in the context of their everyday life. For instance, Latif's mother demonstrates an amalgamation of prejudice-based anxieties incorporating the methods of colonialism, exoticism and Westoxication; pointing towards a rising panic within the Arab family home over matters such as sexuality, masculinity and cultural dilution.

Thinking more broadly about the issue of masculine identities that Latif's statements exemplify, this framework allows us to further sketch out the way in which these men's 'Arabness' is generally being perceived, debated and managed in relation to sexuality. The tension at play is Arab men's proximity to Non-Arab cultures. Latif's mother's statement that "*'el ajanib ye'adonik ebmankarhum'* [Translation: *white foreigners are infecting you with their sin.*]" again emerges as significant when noting that Latif is an upper-middle class Arab man who was educated in an international school. (Aldrich, 2008; Klinken, 2012)

"I don't talk to a lot of Arab guys online ... I aim for the military guys [American and British]"

When asked to elaborate he states:

"I only go online to have fun and for sex. I'm muwajab [Translation: top] ... with sex the salib Arab [Translation: bottom] guys want you to talk to them like they're women and I'm not into that... Military guys are more normal"

Like Ebrahim, same-sex sexual roles are being associated with gender roles by Latif, albeit in a different manner. Ebrahim alludes to assumptions about terms such as 'Khaneeth' to affirm his amalgamated understandings of effeminacy and masculinity, in an effort to unlink gender expression from any assumed sexual practices. Latif, on the other hand, subscribes to a notion of Muwajab/Top as the role permissible to him as a masculine Arab MSMs, rejecting any interaction with Arab men he perceives as feminine.

A lot of work has recently focused on deconstructing issues related to sex discrimination online, the problematic association of sexual practice with masculinity in gay culture, the

misogyny of problematising same-sex sexual roles' associations with womanhood and femininity, and the impact of what has been termed 'online masc4masc culture' on the identity formation of same-sex desiring men. (Kendell, 2004; Long, 2013; Shuckerow, 2014; Helligar, 2017; Newton, 2017; Conte, 2018). Latif's own sense of masculinity is affirmed by his sexual preferences. However, how he also relates this to his understandings of his 'Arabness' adds some complexity to this issue. When asked about Arab Salibs/Bottoms who are not effeminate he states:

"They want you to act like woman even if they say they want a normal guy. It's harder to find someone to be close to."

He objects to the way in which these Arab men "do" both their femininity and their masculinity. Latif is thus symbolic of a conception of Arab same-sex desire that is wrapped up in notions of gender, and so he conceives of his Arab MSM masculinity as being consistently under threat by the feminine. He affirms his own Arab manhood as a same-sex desiring man by rejecting what he feels is the abnormal way Arab same-sex desiring men perform their gender - and sexuality. In this way, Latif amalgamates a form of gender policing that is similar to his mother's in his understanding of his gender and sexual identities. Femininity in interactions with Arab MSMs are a source of panic and anxiety that he refuses to allow into his definitions of acceptable Arab MSM masculinity.

This is a theme that recurred in multiple interviews that I conducted with Arab MSMs who were educated in international schools.

"I don't like gay gay guys." – Omar, 25, Dubai

"Every [Arab] gay guy I've ever chatted [with] got weird and tried to call me his girl" – Jamal, 23, Oman

"I prefer Americans, they're not confused" – Mohammed, 26, Dubai

The origin of their respective anxieties is varied. However, and like Latif, they indicate that scrutiny over their expressions of gender as Arab men is a pressure point. To that effect, it continues to impact how they perceive, interact with and understand each other.

‘Shia’ & ‘Sunni’: Masculinity & Inter-sectarian Orientalism

“My first boyfriend was shia, my family liked him a lot.” – Fahad, 29, Bahrain

The majority of the Islamic population in Bahrain is Shia Muslim, forming 70 percent. However, the majority of the ruling class (Military, government and business leaders) are Sunni. Following the events of the Arab Spring, the sectarian divisions separating different communal groups (Baharna, Sunni Arabs, Howala, Ajam, Asians) that are riven into the cultural ecosystem of Bahrain have received increased focus (Lulu, 2011). These divisions stem from a policy developed by the ruling family and its allies in the 18th century, who “appropriated land from indigenous Shia owners and effectively made them peasants.” (ibid.).

Moving to the 21st century we can see the continuing impact of these policies. The majority of high-ranking government positions are overseen by members of the Sunni-ruling family, Sunni allies and with only a few Shia representatives, who pay deference to the desires of the Sunni Sheikhs in the room. The conditions that led to the Arab spring in Bahrain (and the subsequent reactions both within and in the neighbouring gulf countries) are complex, and largely outside the scope of this research (See, for these discussions, the work of Matthiesen, 2013 and Haseeb, 2012). However, it serves us to point out that the calls for reform in Bahrain stemmed from a coalition of Shia citizens. This coalition was speaking out against conditions that negatively impact their social standing, economic status, and civil rights. (ibid) Equally, the crushing of these protests stemmed from a coalition of Sunni rulers, throughout the Arab gulf, converging to consolidate against this threat against their powers.

I say all this to highlight the cultural divisions that separate Sunni and Shia Muslim populations throughout the Arab gulf, so that we have this context in mind when considering Fahad’s subsequent statements. Fahad’s family is firmly pro-government, and in our discussion it became clear that they casually throw out prejudicial statements about Shia people.

“I try to not talk about politics with anyone at home. I know how it’ll go”

He goes on to state that they frequently refer to Shia people as terrorists, that his parents discourage his younger siblings from interacting with non-Sunni classmates and that they would firmly reject the idea of his sisters marrying a non-Sunni man. Moreover, Fahad is not out to his family. He is still expected to marry and fulfil his role as an ‘Arab man’ by marrying a Sunni-woman. Considering this antipathy and prejudice, I had to ask why he felt his family thought his Shia former partner was a good ‘friend’ for him.

“They didn’t like me being around a shia guy when they heard people talk about seeing us together. They didn’t want him at the house and told me to stop being around him. They thought him and his family were dangerous and didn’t want people seeing him coming in and out of our house. I guess they [started to like] him being around me when they actually met him.”

Adding:

“[He] was opposite of me. He played football with my brothers and teased and flirted with my mom and sister. He was a complete “guy”. He’s even taller and hairier than my dad ... We broke up a long time ago. They still ask me to invite him over and say that he was a good ‘friend’ for me to have”

Fahad lists off a series of traits and characteristics that are typically associated with Arab masculinity. His former partner looked masculine, was flirtatious towards women, physically active and interested in sports (Inhorn, 2012; Eynde, 2015). Additionally, Fahad indicates that his then partner’s masculinity was distinctly different to how he perceived his own gender identity.

“I hate sports, I’d read and wasn’t very loud. I care about the stuff that I wear and like to have my hair cut and beard trimmed ... They joke calling me ‘ebnaty’ [Translation: Sissy] when I was a kid...But it’s not serious.”

Fahad’s relationship was in many ways transgressive, as it goes against his family culture. But his Shia boyfriend was welcomed because he was considered a ‘good influence’ because his masculinity might be learned by Fahad, or that it would influence it. Fahad himself found that his partner’s masculine presentation was helpful in his everyday life:

“People leave you alone when you’re with this big Shia guy ... you could take care of them if there were problems”

Adding:

“I like being with [a] rayal [Translation: man’s man], I don’t have to be the one who is trying to be”

On the one hand, a masculine presenting partner afforded a sense of protection for Fahad. On the other, while he does not identify as feminine, his association with someone that is understood as being overtly masculine allowed him the space to explore his own sense of masculinity. Also, it helped him avoid critiques as pointed as Latif’s mother from his own family.

“They probably just felt better about me having someone who felt ‘straight’ around me. Their son wouldn’t have any problems or make any problems.”

Fahad demonstrate what we could term as inter-sectarian orientalism. A theme that frequently arose when Arab MSMs in these divided sects discussed one another. Overt references to a perceived masculinity of Shia men recurred in my interviews with multiple Sunni MSMs. Their conceptions of Shia men as masculine, virile and aggressive was framed as a positive. Likewise, my interviews with Shia MSM pertained references to their perceived femininity of Sunni MSM.

For instance, Asad (31, Qatar) discussing his Sunni partner states:

“He wears tight jeans, his hair is long, he wears bracelets and he always smells like some perfume. I’ve never seen him look like he rushed to get ready.”

He goes on to compare his partner to himself:

“I wear my thobe and qitra. It’s easier.”

While the image that is being put across is that of Sunni men eluding cultural images of Arab manhood, Asad indicates that they have more leeway to exist closer to the feminine:

“All [Sunni] men are like this. [He likes acting naem] and making sure his hair is right... he takes longer to get ready than my sister.”

I asked him to elaborate on his use of the word naem:

“They talk quiet, kiss you on your cheek and try to make you like them. When you see a gay sunni guy wearing a thob it’s the new cut and his qitra is stiff. I was with one for a while who only wanted to call me his ‘zoji’ [Translation: Husband] and liked us texting poems about how much we were in love every night.”

The perceived femininity of Sunni men is fetishized by Asad, similar to the way in which the perceived masculinity of Shia men is fetishized by Fahad. Even when wearing the traditional dress that Asad dons regularly he points out that their variation is tailored and their qitras are starched to impress.

The dynamics inherent to these conceptions recall familiar systems of power we see in the Western region. While not all Sunnis are affluent in the Arab gulf region, and similarly not all Shia people are impoverished, the former are collectively considered as being part of a privileged social class (Hunter, 2007). In Asad’s statements we see a familiar idea of upper-class feminine masculinity versus working class masculinity (Chalabi, 2016; Neillssen and Young, 2007; Pyke, 1996). It is worth noting however that that doesn’t necessarily mean that any of these masculinities are being viewed in the negative by the same-sex desiring people involved.

Fahad made a point of highlighting both the cultural and sexual desirability of his ex-partner’s performance - and his own security in his own sense of masculinity. For his part Asad states:

“I guess my type is a Sunni guy. He’s naem [Translation: soft/feminine], likes to take care of himself. I like how they need me... when you’re with them it’s also just cleaner.”

When asked how these relationships are tolerated within their wider circles, Asad states:

“Some people think it’s weird that I hang out with Sunnis. All of the ones I am with know what’s happening [...] agree that it’s not good... ‘endina wahed minhum’ [Translation: we have one of them on our side] so they get over it.”

A specific form of orientalism is taking place here. Both parties generalise, fetishize and desire what they consider to be othered forms of Arab manhood. However, this also serves to affirm their understandings of their own. Perhaps it is worth turning to David Morgan here, who when discussing the different class conceptions of masculinity in the UK states:

“These differences might be seen as variations on a theme; the “respectable” breadwinning working man and the sober, rational member of the bourgeoisie might have a lot in common in terms of a sense of what it is to be a man, despite the large differences and oppositions in class terms.” (2004, pg. 172)

Indeed, the themes that sprang forth from my interviews with Fahad and Asad demonstrate that this process of othering masculinities is related to systems of power that these individuals occupy. Asad’s othering of his partners seeks to affirm his cultural dominance. Similarly, Fahad’s othering of his partner’s masculinity, and the approximation of it in his orbit, helps him be more secure in his closet.

One possible reading of my subjects’ experiences might be inclined to argue that they demonstrate a conception of self (and each other) that is largely indebted to the legacy of orientalism reshaping the paradigm of the region. Such perspectives might also argue that these interchanges between sects of Arab MSM in the Gulf serve as a telling reflection of the accepted forms of masculinity that orientalism has allowed for.

In proposing a ‘third way’ in the analysis of Arab subjectivities, I seek to move beyond these critiques and towards more intently reflecting how these forces are interacting with our subjects’ context specific experiences today. Indeed, this ‘third way’ has elucidated the surprising ways in which they are interacting with the legacy of Orientalism and, as in Fahad and Asad’s case, it enables us to see how it coloured their perceptions of others and has been factored into their conceptions of self.

Conclusion

At the start of this chapter I set out the following question: How do the men in my study relate to and perform masculinity?

To answer that, we must start by saying that the centring the subjectivity of my participants reveals that the situation of masculinity for Arab MSMs has quickly proven itself to be even as varied and complex as one might anticipate.

Working within the micro sense enabled by our analytical focus, we can see a growing division between the way in which Shia Muslim MSMs and Sunni Muslim MSMs might perform their masculinities, and in the way in which they conceive of each other. This demonstrates issues of fetishization, objectification and privilege that seem to be largely informed by the social cultures that they occupy. Similarly, these issues impact interactions within the family structure when Arab MSM engage in behaviour that is read as feminine. This results in their performance of masculinity being understood as a form of ‘betrayal’ towards Arabness, masculinity, and Arab masculinity in particular – thus resulting in their marginalisation and exclusion. With Ebrahim, this exclusion is taken on and turned outwards. Reclamation becomes a method in which one can situate themselves within both their masculinities and Arabness – and allow for one way to react to everyday provocations.

Taking it to the macro view, we see clearly that a major force underlying these examples is the nation state. It is the voice that Latif’s mother is able to speak with, and the force that she wields in an attempt to correct her son’s masculinity. Moreover, the nation state serves as the force that shapes perceptions around the masculinities of Shia and Sunni men, which also seeming to add to their desirability for respective Shia and Sunni MSMs. The masculinity that the nation state defines is consistently being tied to the Arabness of these men, and of men in the Arab region in general – and fixing themselves within (or around) the nations’ definition becomes an important feature in the understandings Arab MSM come to about their genders.

To conclude this chapter, I return to the quote that opens it:

“Every culture (or group) has implicit standards about the appropriate roles that men must enact to be judged masculine” (Franklin, 1984, p. 130)

Latif, Asad, Fahad and Ebrahim are all aware of the influence of the environment on how they are perceived, and I contend that we can see its influence in how they perceive themselves. The ‘implicit standards’ are constantly being made explicit, and they orbit around those rules daily - while finding tactics to carve out new understandings privately.

Chapter 4: Digital Dogma: Relating Manifestations of Religion Online to the Practices and Experiences of Arab MSM

Introduction

“For Foucault, the relationship between moral codes and modes of subjectivization is not over-determined, however, in the sense that the subject simply complies with moral codes (or resists them). Rather, Foucault’s framework assumes that there are many different ways of forming a relationship with a moral code, which establishes a particular relationship between capacities of the self (will, reason, desire, action and so on) and a particular norm. “- Saba Mahmood (2005, pg. 3)

Michel Foucault’s work on subjectivity and ethical formation posits that it is produced in response to formative practices and codes existing prior to the individual, and that it is best understood as a modality of power. As I have laid out in Chapter 2, much of the work written about Arab sexualities has touched on his framings when discussing how Arab subjectivities are formed by power relations (Kugle, 2014; Massad, 2007; Said 1978). I open this text with Saba Mahmood’s reading of Foucault to extend our thinking about this canon of established writing as I go on to consider my subjects’ agency in relation to their moral and ethical self-understandings. By broadening our horizons to think of religion, agency and Arab MSM beyond the frames of “good gays reject religion”, “religion is anti-gay” and “religious gays must reclaim the institutions they seek to occupy”, we gain an increased understanding of how religion is folded into their personal experiences and identities. In writing about religion and same-sex desiring Arabs I am also calling for us to reflect on how these individuals articulate their subjectivities in both their everyday lives and the online space.

The topic of religion has received renewed focus in media over the past decade. In part, this is due to increased awareness over the role of religious organisations and practices in global events (Taylor & Snowdon, pg xiii). Same-sex desires as it relates to religion has also emerged as a hotly debated subject matter within contemporary academia – and more generally within the cultural conversation. A prominent example would be the work of Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. As discussed elsewhere, her defining of the word *Homonationalism* denotes the actions taken by state powers to align with LGBTQIA liberal positions and perspectives, thus enabling them to inversely align with – and enact - xenophobic actions in relation to Islam, the Arab region, and migrants who originate from the Arab region (Puar, 2007). We have seen similar arguments subsequently filter out of academic circles and into broader cultural

conversations. One prominent example would be the attention directed towards Prime Minister Theresa May's work as Home Secretary and the office's practice of frequently deporting LGBTQI asylum seekers (Lyons, 2017). The topic received renewed attention in 2017 when the then Prime Minister was asked to deliver a speech in support of the LGBTQI community at the Pink News Awards. Her record in relation to the deportation of asylum seeking LGBTQI individuals during her tenure as Home Secretary was used to criticise the invitation. (Out News Global, 2017; Butterworth, 2017) Indeed, the idea of homonationalism is not confined to the fields of academia and has been incorporated - and applied - to larger public narratives aiming to hold political leaders accountable for their actions – and to express frustrations about their inaction.

At the heart of this framing of homonationalism is a call to hold those in power accountable for the explicit violence being enacted on Arab people and Islamic cultures when aligning LGBTQI concerns with xenophobic action. Thus, it is also important for us to note the ways in which the topic of Islamophobia has been brought into these debates. Writing for 972Magazine, Natasha Roth summarizes the ways in which the language of queer liberation has been adapted by far-right groups. She cites statements made by, then presidential nominee, Donald J. Trump on June 13th, 2016 in response to a mass shooting at Pulse (an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando, Florida) committed by Omar Mateen. In her analysis she argues that Donald Trump's statements typify an emerging tactic being utilised by a growing movement which presupposes that Muslims cannot be victims of religious extremism - and erases the fact that the most prominent threat towards LGBTQI communities in the United States are Caucasian religious conservative groups (Roth, 2017). The tactic Roth describes results in the conflation of all Arabs with Muslims, conceives of all Muslims as religious extremists, erases the existence of LGBTQ Muslims, and contends that the far-right is equipped to protect LGBTQ communities from homophobia – so long as that homophobia is coming from Muslims. (Roth, 2017)

A series of political figures and powers have made similar arguments to LGBTQ voters while campaigning. For example, Netherlands' Geert Wilders claimed that Islam poses a threat towards the freedoms of gay people (Feder, Shulte and Deen, 2017) and France's Marine Le Pen paired an argument against same-sex marriage with the assertion that her party was the only one able to defend LGBTQ people from Islamist violence (Wildman, 2017). Elsewhere, the treatment of LGBTQ Palestinians under occupation and the

continued struggle to push legislation for the advancement of LGBTQ rights within Israel has received critical attention – as has the lack of global political engagement with that subject matter (Khoury, 2015; Lis, 2017).

The topic of religion has also been brought up in relation to colonialism and queer orientalism. For instance, Lord Waheed Alli called for England to come to terms with its colonial past when calling for the advancement of LGBTQ rights throughout the world (Alli, 2018). The framing of LGBTQI advocacy has also received some focus, for instance in analysis of the far-right efforts of figures such as Milo Yiannopoulos and how their framing of Arab cultures and same-sex desire as binaries work to build an idea of Western queer exceptionalism (Jones, 2017). Similarly, as I touched on when discussing globalism and advocacy in Chapter 3, scholars such as Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir and Esra Erdem have called on us to cast a critical eye at the work of activists such as Peter Thatchell in relation to the Arab region, and to question to what extent their work might be colonial and Islamophobic in nature (Haritaworn, et al. 2008).

Literature that explores religion, same-sex desire and Arab persons is vast. However, much work often shares a trait that we need to contend with; they treat Arab persons and cultures of faith as imagined subjects to be discussed within the context of same-sex desire. In other words, much of this work talks *about* Arab same-sex desiring subjects, but not *to* them. This chapter continues walking down the path laid out by my analytical framework to re-contextualise our thinking on this subject in relation to the lived experiences of same-sex desiring Arabs. I reflect on the ways in which religion featured in discussions with my interview participants, and what can be gleaned from these conversations. I note that the ultimate goal of this chapter is not to argue for the viability of same-sex desire in a Muslim lifestyle, to construct a queer Islamic theology or to offer a historical examination of the debates surrounding Islam and same-sex desire. Instead, I seek to highlight the ways in which religion is folded into the everyday practices and experiences of same-sex desiring Arab men living in the Gulf region of the Middle East, and how it is being folded into their understandings of self.

Discussing Religion in Interviews

I initially chose not to directly question my participants about the topic of faith and religion. I was apprehensive that the data I collected would ultimately fall into a reductive, and familiar narrative; one where I would find myself discussing my subjects in a way framing them as oppressed Arab queers suffering under a state's power. I was also less than confident that directly questioning them about faith would provide any specific insight into the ways in which it factors into their everyday lives. I worried it would tell me more about how they generally felt about faith and religious institutions, rather than how they navigate and negotiate a relationship with religion. However, as I began conducting interviews, I noticed the topic emerging organically as a theme that ran throughout the data I was collecting. I ultimately rethought my stance and took full account of the ways in which religion is embedded in the lives of the people I was interviewing.

Indeed, the importance of recognising faith extended past the information I was collecting and impacted the process of organising and conducting the interviews. In retrospect, it is perhaps predictable that I received many cancellation emails citing a feeling of religious or spiritual guilt about openly talking about sexuality. Surprisingly however, many interviews I ended up successfully conducting was paired with initial interactions with participant expressing excitement about being able to openly speak about their sexuality and its relationship to their beliefs, in spite of the fact that I had not explicitly mentioned religion in my recruitment material. Notably, I noticed that many cancellations and no-shows happened during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and is observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, spiritual reflection. The observance of this holy month happens annually and impacts the lives of people living in Muslim countries both societally and legally. For instance, public eating, drinking of liquids and smoking during daylight hours is a crime that could result in fines, incarceration and community in the countries of Kuwait, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia; the sale of alcohol is prohibited; restaurants are unable to serve any customers in daylight hours and are only permitted to open an hour prior to the setting of the sun which is when the daily fasting is broken (termed Futoor).

In the Gulf region of the Arabian Peninsula, Ramadan is a time where religion and piety comes to the fore within Arab cultures. This, however, goes beyond the legislative and we the impact of it colouring the community relations and interactions of people in Arab cultures. Futoor in itself emerges as the most important time of the day for reasons beyond the fact that it is a religious moment when people sit down to break their fasting. It is also time when families customarily gather to eat together after saying a silent prayer, often with the patriarch sitting at the head of the table while the matriarch is passing the plates to serve. I would be remiss to ignore this particularly heteronormative moment that is being customarily recalled on a daily basis throughout this month. Thus, Ramadan emerges as a time when Arab culture is imbuing societal roles with religious significance and the idea of the heteronormative family is placed on a spiritual pedestal.

Some might argue that the interviews I conducted at this time might have coloured the findings I go on to discussed, however I posit it enabled me to broach topics that both my Muslim and non-Muslim Arab MSM interviewees were thinking about annually before ever agreeing to sit with me. Despite my hesitance, my initial observations highlighted the pressing need for me to take into account this topic, and this was later affirmed when outside of Ramadan my interviewees explicitly moved our discussions to the topic of faith. Thus, I amended my interview script, allowing me to follow up on the subject matter when it came up. As I go on to show, faith and the cultures of faith are undeniable organising principals for my participants that are very much embedded within their lives, identities and practices.

Jassim: Religion as Camouflage

One of the first instances that underlined the importance of discussing faith with my interviewees happened during my conversation with Jassim, a 23-year-old Emirati man who described himself as a “*gay atheist*”. During our conversation, he first touched on the topic of religion when asked about the spaces in which he existed as a gay man in his everyday life. Jassim suggested that his involvement with religious practices as a child are what made him aware of his sexuality. He states:

‘I used to love going to the mosque when I was younger every Friday and being surrounded by all these guys shaking my hand and kissing my cheeks cause I was kid who ‘loved to pray’

[NOTE: the customary greeting in the Arab region is to shake hands and kiss both cheeks; and the nose if you were greeting an elder].

He went on to elaborate that these religious rituals were eventually folded into his sexual practices: *‘I remember I’d occasionally ‘slip’ and kiss someone on the lips sometimes’*. Jassim indicated that this space became an integral part of his awareness of his sexual desires, as he used it to both explore his sexual desires and to fetishize the attention he received over his perceived religiosity.

When asked how religion factored in his life he said:

‘I never really took any of it seriously. I started going by myself and now my parents are convinced that I’m going to be an Imam. Which is good cause they stopped asking me about getting married.’

In relation to the way in which it factors into his online experiences he added:

‘When I’m online on my private accounts I don’t really need to pretend to be religious. I can do what I want and be as gay as I want. I keep everything private so my family doesn’t see anything, but even if they did I don’t think they’d be too worried. They’d just think someone’s using my pictures or that I was getting something out of my system but would never act on it.’

For Jassim, a façade of religiosity allowed him to escape the scrutiny experienced by many same-sex desiring Arabs. In a sense, he has been able to use it as a form of armour – by investing effort in pushing an idea of himself as pious he is afforded certain

privileges. These privileges include the ability to evade questions related to his sexuality, his desires and notions of his societal duty. Robert Wuthnow wrote on the topic of religion as it relates to the issues of social capital, power and influence. He considered religion as status-bridging by arguing that it spans the arrangements of power and influence in social networking (Wuthnow, 2002, 2003).

With this in mind, I frame religion here as armour because Jassim discusses it around the language of protection. It provides him with a reprieve from the pressures he could face if he made his sexuality and religious beliefs public within his social circle (Fahmy, 2005; Li & Marsh, 2008). He is able to trade the idea of himself as religious to access a social class where questions about his sexuality, masculinity and social responsibilities are irrelevant – and where the impact of discovery is lessened. (Jackson, 2018)

In regard to how he constructs this image of himself he said:

‘When I’m at home I try and pray now where people can see me, it’d look weird if I didn’t. I keep a prayer mat in my room floor and move it after every prayer if I’m ‘praying in my room’.’

Constructing a public identity of piety has led to a different kind of ritualistic duty being performed by Jassim. I have observed this across other interviews with Arab men who identify as both gay and atheists but make an effort to outwardly present a pious public image to camouflage their sexual identities. For example:

Youssef, 20, Saudi Arabia:

‘Everyone thinks [I am] ‘metdayen’ [Translation: Conservative and religious]. They know better than to talk to me about girls cause they think I’ll tell them off or judge them.’

Ali, 27, Kuwait:

‘I usually pray in front of people; I get nervous when someone asks me if I’ve prayed today or not cause it feels like a test.’

Like Jassim, they demonstrate how meticulously curated these personas are – and suggest the benefits of maintaining the façade and performing religion. This recalls Anthon

Jackson (2018) writing about the practices of Egyptian atheists and the social benefit of hiding that fact to maintain social capital: “passing and occasionally pretending has become an art form to perfect, a time-honored tradition of secrecy... How could they be so bold as to go public now?”

To return to Jassim, he added:

‘I [...] go to mosques now and scroll through Grindr, you’d be surprised at the amount of people who pop up. It’s one of my main places to flirt and sometimes even meet other gay guys in person [...] I don’t worry about being found out cause like if you’re there you obviously can’t be a gay.’

There are two things we can infer from his comments. Firstly, that the mosque is perceived as being a space only open to a certain category of man: the Muslim, the devout, and the heterosexual. Jassim, however, identifies as none of these things but is able to freely act out those roles. Moving within this culture of faith, religion is transformed into a tool that allows him to both escape detection and explore his sexuality. This recalls Casella and Fowler’s argument regarding the ways in which people actively represent their identity: “Personhood ... [is] not endlessly mutable, nor are such features of identity best understood in definitive terms at any moment in their activation” (2005, pg.7). While Jassim’s account demonstrates a continually evolving process by which he is shaping an outward performance of his identity – it also shows that he has a fixed idea on what his *true* identity is. He is privately asserting aspects of his identity, such as his sexuality and his atheism, while publicly looking as if he has no association with such identities.

Considering my own use of the ‘private’ and ‘public’, I note here that one conventional way of understanding Jassim might assert that the online allows for authenticity, while the offline necessities that he don a camouflage. However, Jassim’s experiences can also be thought of in relation to theory exploring performative personhood in online contexts. Marwick and boyd (2010) have discussed this topic in relation to audience management online, writing:

“Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as ‘context collapse’. The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites” (ibid. pg. 122)

In other words, the collapsing of context on social networking sites results in users needing to navigate their online performances of self with the multiplicity of their possible audiences:

“Twitter users negotiate multiple, overlapping audiences by strategically concealing information, targeting tweets to different audiences and attempting to portray both an authentic self and an interesting personality” (ibid.)

They go on to also ruminate on what tensions that arise out of strategies for audience management in the face of context collapse, arguing:

“Managing the networked audience requires monitoring and responding to feedback, watching what others are doing on the network, and interpreting followers’ interests. The network is therefore a collaborator in the identity and content presented by the speaker, and the imagined audience becomes visible when it influences the information Twitter users choose to broadcast.” (ibid. pg. 130)

With this in mind, we could argue that due to the nature of the online Jassim’s performance of self in the online space is likely as calibrated as his claiming of religiosity elsewhere. While Marwick and boyd were specifically discussing the social networking site Twitter, we can see links to their discussion of the melding of selfhoods on online platforms. Thus, the aforementioned issues of authenticity and freedom that might be raised are immediately complicated when acknowledging that Jassim’s performance of self ‘offline’ informs his performance of self ‘online’ and so on. Indeed, and in all cases, he seeks to invoke an audience that will understand and interact with his performance as intended. These strategies of performing and mediating the self in different spaces and to different audiences – be they online and/or offline – reflect some of the prominent ways in which Arab MSM are blending these different conceptions to find new ways to inhabit their personhood today.

Thus, moving us towards the second possible inference we can make, as through such interactions with the online Jassim is able to actively queer a religious space. Or to borrow from Marwick and boyd’s (ibid.) terminology, these interactions aim to expand an otherwise rigid context by imagining and invoking a new audience. Playing devout enables him to signal his queerness to others using through this strategy, further indicating a slowly growing community of same-sex desiring ‘Muslims’ who incorporate religion into their performances of self to safely move about spaces where their presence would

be unfathomable. I use the term ‘play’ here with intention. It becomes relevant in other instances in my conversation with Jassim, and a few other participants who, like him, talked about their pleasure at finding ways to include their queerness into otherwise unwelcoming environments.

When I asked Jassim to elaborate on the exchanges he has when at the mosques he said:

‘I do it during the Friday prayer speech. I sit at the back trying to get someone to send me a face pic or I guess who they are’

The use of Grindr at a mosque is presented here as a kind of game. On the one hand, he suggests that it allows him a distraction from both the environment and the proceedings. However, and more interestingly, it seems to also ‘fix’ him in the space and allows him to derive some sense of pleasure from it. Jassim is finding joy and freedom in the way in which he imposes his sexual desires and identity in a space that would otherwise reject him while also failing to conceive of the possibility him.

This was related to me in another form when speaking to Ahmed (26, Bahrain) who stated:

‘[I] do Grindr a lot in the day in Ramadan [...] Muslim gays are too scared to come on when fasting so you find more relaxed people without the drama’

When asked about memorable interactions he has had during Ramadan, he stated:

‘I once got a message saying ‘futoor is ready’ and a sexy picture, which made me laugh ... I sent back ‘astaqfurillah’ and a wink’ [Astaqfurillah is a common Arabic phrase that translates to: God forgive me.]

In his example, the religious environment – Ramadan - is being reshaped to allow for the flirtatious exchanges and amorous interaction. To go back to my earlier discussion of Futoor, I note the subversive power and joy of offering up one’s body as ‘futoor’. Similarly, I note the camp refrain that can be read in the response of ‘astaqfurillah’, a phrase usually reserved for self-admonishment or the shaming of others. In my chapter titled ‘Man of the House’, I proposed that my subject’s reclamation of the word ‘Khaneeth’ spoke to the incorporation to the derogatory ways in which their masculinity

was being conceived of in the family space into a new understanding of self that is at once effeminate, masculine, sexual and Arab. In Ahmed, who identifies as both gay and Muslim, we can see something similar happening in this reclamation. Religious practice that is rigidly heteronormative and spiritual in the way it occupies cultural understanding is made playful. It is transformed and made to denote shared desires, cultural understandings, and identities - having seeped into the interaction of two Arab men seeking to show they are comfortable with desiring each other in Ramadan.

Despite the subtitle of this section, these men's relationship to religion goes beyond using it as a means to camouflage their sexuality. In online media they use it as a method of protection, as a means of expressing their sexual desires for one another, and to denote the very safety of their desiring. They are transforming religion beyond our possibly expected narratives and with it we see an emergence of new Arab MSM relational possibilities. (Bratton, 2009)

Adel: Reconciliation

Like Jassim, Adel is an Arab man who identifies as gay. However, unlike him, he is a 27-year-old Kuwaiti man who considers himself to be deeply religious. I approached him for an interview after seeing his twitter feed, where he often posts about his experiences as a gay Arab Muslim living in Kuwait. My conversations with him yielded a long discussion about his views on online media as an activist tool. He discussed it as a means of advocating for a more progressive Islamic society, its ability to allow him to live semi-publicly as a gay Muslim man and to offer a voice that can relate the experiences of gay Muslim men.

When we discussed the text used in his Grindr profile, I noted that he described himself as ‘Muslim first and gay second.’ When asked to elaborate on why he used that specific wording he stated:

‘I still pray, I go to mosque, I fast and read the Quran. I’m also gay and like men.’

Throughout our conversation, Adel framed the internet within his life history as a medium that forced him to confront both his sexual and religious identities. Speaking in reference to his early experiences online he said:

‘I remember getting porn pop ups of women, being annoyed and closing them quickly and saying ‘astaqfurallah’ [...] but once I got a gay pop up and spent too much time looking at it before closing it, saying ‘astaqfurallah’ and feeling guilty. I didn’t know what I was really, but I didn’t feel ‘wrong’ like they say’

He added:

‘It made me have to think about my reaction to something and compare it to my reaction to something else... I was rushing to close one pop-up over the other.’

For Adel, this experience led him to consider his sexuality, which in turn led to him re-evaluating his religious identity:

‘I spent a lot of time panicking about being gay ... I didn’t really think about trying to change it but kept searching for ways that it didn’t mean I was going to

burn in hell or whatever. I remember googling anything I could about gay and Islam and saving pages and quotes that said it was fine because I couldn't stop believing in God... [Eventually] I said if you can be Christian and gay ... Muslim and gay isn't impossible'

Adel echoes Leonard Norman Primiano's discussion of the parishioners of Dignity/Philadelphia, an LGBTQ+ friendly parish, when writing:

"In an age when many individual Catholics viewed the tradition's practices and culture as irrelevant and easy to abandon, these gay and lesbian Catholics felt it was necessary, deserved and desirable to retain their affiliation." (2005, pg. 10)

For Adel, the process of working to reconcile these two aspects of his identity allows him to affirm a sense of self within a religious structure and community. When speaking about his presence online and the ways in which he openly puts forth certain aspects of his identity online he stated:

'Part of it is cause [sic] I'd want to see it, and also cause [sic] it gives me a place to be both things with other people.'

In that effort, he developed a specific set of tactics online that allow him to exist in his everyday life as both a gay and Muslim man on Twitter. These strategies include:

- Using no identifiable characteristics in profile description that could place him in any personal jeopardy (such as sharing locations or linking to any other social media profile)
- Regularly changing his profile handle.
- Making an effort to scan the timelines of any new users that follow him and blocking those who express any anti-LGBT or Islamophobic views.
- Linking his account to a web app called 'Block Together' which makes use of the Twitter API to subscribe to 'block lists' that automatically block accounts that have been flagged by other users for Islamophobic and anti-gay tweets. Thereby limiting the potential of harassment- and limiting the visibility of his account to users he does not wish to interact with.
- Deleting tweets that become highly circulated and could bring unwanted attention to his profile.

- Frequently switching his Twitter profile between private and public (making his tweets un-shareable and only visible to those already following him).

Through these tactics Adel seeks to curate an audience that is receptive to his postings, while also limiting any potential harassment he might endure. He implies that this effort is necessary so that he may operate in a medium that offers up new ways to articulate his experiences and identity. However, due to the collapse of context online and the resultant drive to manage expectations of multiple and diverse audiences, thereby complicating self-performance, his digital presence requires constant surveillance and work. (See Davis & Jurgenson, 2014 and Hogan, 2010) Thus, in his interfacing with Twitter, Adel engages with religion in regular and consistent ways in his everyday life.

Indeed, despite these efforts Adel is still regularly met with pushback:

'I always have someone in my mentions talking about how I'm going to burn in hell. It doesn't bother me. What I hate is when I get other [gay Arabs] making fun of me, or calling me crazy or pathetic.'

The resistance that Adel faces from other gay identifying Arabs when religion is explicitly brought up in certain spaces is worth noting, not least because this issue arose several times in my interviews. When speaking to Salah (31, Qatar, Muslim), about interactions he avoids when using Grindr, he stated:

'If you mention Allah or Islam to me I will block you. I have that on my profile. I'm not here for that.'

In multiple interviews similar statements to the one above were expressed to me. I use Salah's quote because he, like Adel, explicitly self-identified during our interview as a deeply religious Muslim man. His statement demonstrates that, unlike Adel, some Muslim same-sex desiring men find value in separating their religious lives from their sexual lives (see Barrett, 2005, pg. 91 and Kugle, 2014, pg. 31 for a discussion of this theme). However, the finding that is perhaps most relevant to maintains that this study of religion and online space lays out how emerging Arab MSM identities today are tied to a process of reconciling multiplicity.

Like Jassim, Adel and Salah are consciously engaging with their performances of self, and the contextually collapsed nature of online platforms require the development of new tactics of articulating that performance in the face of an underdefined imagined audiences. (Marwick & boyd, 2011; boyd, 2007; Livingstone, 2005) What emerges in relation to these articulations and interactions offers us a glimpse into our subjects' own conceptions of self. As, Adel put forth:

I don't think me being gay has to mean I stop being Muslim. I'm pretty sure Muhammed never said anything about it.'

In these negotiations between the conceived self, the audience and the online Adel reconciles different aspects of his sexuality with his religious beliefs. By concurrently asserting his desires and his religious beliefs in everyday life he is able to reconcile forces he once considered as being binary. What this demonstrates is the new ways Arab MSMs are finding to relate to religion, and how they are actively engaging with narratives that seek to limit those possibilities. Indeed, it also further demonstrates how Arab MSM today are navigating their own multiplicity to blend conceptions that articulate their identities. (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Vitaj, 2012)

Zaid: Religion as Code of Conduct

Similar to Salah, my conversation with Zaid demonstrated how some of my interview participants compartmentalise different aspects of themselves. In these instances, religion became a structure that shaped the ways in which they occupy online space. Zaid, who is from Dubai, identifies as ‘mithli’. At 38, he sits at the older end of the age spectrum for my interviewees and considers himself most active on networking apps designed for meeting same-sex desiring men such as Grindr and Hornet (which he accesses via VPN on a ‘jailbroken’ iPhone). He also maintains a public Twitter profile that he uses mainly to interact with the friends he is out to, and to access people who identify with the wider spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities, globally. When asked to elaborate on how he interacts with Twitter he listed tactics that were quite similar to the ones employed by Adel. He stated:

‘I change my name [user handle] a lot ... I don’t put my location or post my pictures... I don’t sync up my contacts. I accidentally did that once and had to delete everything and start over because it kept suggesting people I know. I made a new account and blocked family I knew I didn’t want to find me ... I don’t really talk about Islam or being Arab.’

While the efforts that Zaid undertakes to feel comfortable posting about his sexuality on Twitter are not as intensive as Adel’s, these examples demonstrate once again how the specific cultures my interviewees operate within, have an effect on how they interface with these platforms.

I spoke to Zaid in the weeks following Ramadan. Having scheduled the interview during the month and noting the numerous cancellations, I made sure to touch on his relationship to religion in the interview.

The topic of religion came up early in our conversation after Zaid indicated that he initially felt uncomfortable discussing his sexuality during Ramadan. When asked to elaborate on this discomfort, he stated:

‘I didn’t want to deal with this and then wake up and fast the next day cause [sic] it would’ve felt weird [...] I figured what’s the difference. And Ramadan’s done so I stopped feeling like I was about to get hit by lightning.’

As I have previously mentioned, Ramadan was a month where I did not have much luck in conducting interviews, facing many cancellations and no-shows. Zaid's response shows that religious guilt and pressure is likely key to these feelings.

When asked how this feeling translated into his use of online media he stated:

'I try not to look at porn or do the twitter thing. On Grindr and Hornet I have a message saying I'm not looking to meet this month, a lot of people do. It doesn't feel safe. I do check them a lot cause [sic] people talk more instead of jumping to sex.'

Studies of gay social media have explored the possible uses for these spaces beyond the sexual. For instance, Susan Collins (2012) and Mathew Gagne (2012) have respectively written about the potential of digital technologies to connect same-sex desiring communities – and how these new connections can be related to the understandings sexual and gender identities of people in Tunis and Beirut. Similarly, Andrew Shield (2018) considered the potential uses of Grindr to revitalise gay urban spaces and to enable gay men to access housing, jobs and friends.

Zaid's account frames his online presence (and that of those around him) as being carefully self-controlled during Ramadan. I propose that through him we can see that the intersection of everyday religion into the lives of Arab MSM in digital spaces impacts the tone of those spaces. Zaid approaches, and is approached by, others with the understanding that they will not meet until after the month has passed. In this instance, Ramadan leads to a usually sex-coded digital space, often discussed in relation to the momentary interactions it enables (Weiss, 2013; Delamater & Plante, 2015), shifting into one where extended interactions and conversations are what is expected. The everyday faith culture that these men navigate has a demonstrable impact on their experiences in the digital space. Despite this, I reiterate Zaid's above quote about the place of religion in the content he puts out on social media:

'I don't really talk about Islam or being Arab.'

Zaid prefers avoiding the topic of religion online, despite being aware that it influences his interactions with these online spaces he measures to change his behaviours when religious sentiments around him are heightened. I would argue that this indicates that the

month of Ramadan seems to specifically increase the anxieties of local MSM communities. Despite the fact that local governments do not appear to take any additional measures to persecute these communities, heightened atmospheres of religiosity exasperate tensions that are already being experienced by Arab MSM. Their methods of self-policing seem to parallel those are being undertaken by non-same-sex desiring people (as the heightened concerns over piety, and the belief that good deeds are rewarded twofold during the hold month, leads to a shifting of moral codes that result in people going to mosques more often, dressing modestly, and self-censorship of language for example) but their reasoning seems to be over concern over how not fitting in my engender issues of safety. In the digital space, this translates into establishing tactics that seek the safety of not being trolled or questioned for their sexual desires online.

Additionally, religion came up when describing his history of same-sex online practices:

‘The first thing I can remember looking up online, when no one was looking, was things to do with sex, men and Islam.’

He went on to speak about the way in which his earlier experiences online were a routine of research, finding representative figures and attempting to self-define accordingly:

‘I kept trying to find people talking about being mithli and Arab and not crying about it.’

He compared his then interests to the way in which he now occupies space online as a same-sex desiring and identifying Muslim Arab, stating:

‘I don’t really do much of that anymore, I mainly use these apps and stuff to talk to have fun and not be too intense one way or another.’

For Zaid, religion is a structure that he has learned to navigate as a mithli Muslim, both online and offline. The way in which Ramadan is framed shows a specific set of rules those in the Gulf understand as being part of how they interface with these spaces. One where you have a shared understanding of the culture you occupy and the ways in which you must orientate yourself. Zaid’s discussion of religion demonstrates the way in which it has opened up new relational possibilities for Arab MSMs in the Arab region. Religion serves to define the boundaries of his self-understandings, helping him carve out a

definition of how one can live as both an Arab and a same-sex desiring man, and the places safe to do so.

Tariq: Religion as Power

On the other hand, in my conversations with Tariq, a 32-year-old mithli man from Dubai, the anxiety of religion is framed around the interplay of power that arises when it is brought into the online space. When talking about his early experiences as a same-sex desiring man online he stated:

‘There was always someone posting about the Quran and saying we’re being watched and that scared me’

The theme of outsiders coming into these spaces to exert power, via religion, came up frequently in my interviews. When asked to clarify who was bringing up the Quran, Tariq replied:

‘They were probably trolls. I still deal with it today. There’s always someone who’ll send you a message telling you you’re going to hell and sending the same verses about [Lot’s people]. Or ... telling you to reach out for help... You report, block and ignore them. It’s probably some Imam thinking he’s doing some weird jihad some to save our souls.’

Through the use of the word ‘jihad’, Tariq suggests that these figures are a form of digital missionaries. He also alludes to a certain kind of colonisation consistently being attempted in spaces occupied by Arab MSM. Earlier in this thesis I discussed the way in which homosexuality is framed as a Western deviance that is infecting Islamic culture, and how the place Western definitions of sexuality is being interrogated in the work of academics such as Joseph Massad (See chapters 2 and 3). Tariq’s lived experiences demonstrate an Arab attempt being made to regulate what is being read as an othered community in need of folding back into the acceptable. What is notable, however, is the way in which this localises power in these digital spaces, as these outsiders are attempting to call back the small form of it that Arab MSM attained online to resist so that they may be able to establish control. The nature of the online space seems to have made attempts to colonise them difficult.

However, these incursions into gay male online space do have an effect and we should acknowledge this. When asked about his relationship to gay-oriented apps today, one

interviewee named Yasser (25, Kuwait, Mithali) stated that he stopped using them in 2016 after receiving a series of messages from religious zealots:

'I had someone telling me that I was going to burn in hell, or that I need to repent and be saved, every day. I kept maxing out my blocks every night, so I just deleted the app.'

Firstly, Yasser highlights the fact that the design of the software applications and the collapsed nature of networked spaces does not afford privacy to their users, and points to the implied meanings and expected uses of the block (it also perhaps reflects the Western origins and intentions of apps like Grindr). Secondly, it points to the fact that religious attempt to police Arab MSM desires are happening online rather than in person. This seems to indicate that the tactics of public 'invisibility' being deployed by Arab MSM are working, and that while the online is making these communities accessible to each other in new and welcome ways, the current structures of the digital space are rendering them visible in ways that are either unwanted or impossible offline. Thus, leading to the formation of new tactics to manage audiences seeking to wrest control of these spaces. (Marwick & boyd, 2010)

For Tariq, this has manifested in a successful strategy for dealing with religious zealots: 'report, block and ignore' - provided he has enough blocks available/has paid for a premium service. Another strategy is one he observed happening in response to an outsider entering an MSM space and using Qur'anic verses to condemn its inhabitants. Speaking about his earlier experiences of Arab chat rooms frequented by same-sex desiring people he stated:

'[This other user] mainly [insulted] him back.... There [were] some people having 'god fights' with him and sending him their own verses'

These "god fights" recall Melissa Wilcox's (2003, pg. 54) work, in which she argues that one's religious identity no longer relies "on the statuses that institutions confer." Instead they point to people who assert their desires and selfhood by affirming their place within these religious structures. As Boisvert and Johnson (2012, pg. xvi) write:

It has become even clearer that those who did not explicitly or obviously fit into traditional religious institutions often found ways to live their religion, but in decidedly queer ways. The modes of their engagement not only resisted their own official exclusion, but actually contributed to and advanced the development of their religious traditions and, at times, initiated entirely new approaches.

In one sense, Tariq's description of religion – [and how it appears in online gay male space] - shows a community making an effort to apply new readings to religious texts as a means to combat the ways it can be applied to them. More importantly however, it demonstrates the ways in which the online space is delocalising power for its Arab MSM inhabitants and enabling them to establish new patterns of resistance and affirmation.

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, there is an increasing amount of attention being placed on same-sex desires as it relates to Arab cultures and faith. Throughout this chapter, I reframe this conversation by directing our focus to the lived experiences of same-sex desiring Arabs within 'the Islamic world' to explore what emerges as a result of having these conversations in concert with an analytical structure centring subjectivity. Religion and cultures of faith are shown to be embedded in the everyday lives of my interviewees in ways that have a demonstratable impact on how they practice, perform and inhabit their identities.

While religion can be read as a source of anxiety when relating Tariq's experience emerges as a genuine means of self-affirmation. The satisfaction he communicates when describing his experiences with those opposing him elucidates the delocalisation of power that the online space allows for Arab MSM in the Gulf. Similarly, for Zaid religion emerges as the boundary with which he frames his understanding and experience of his sexual identity. It has allowed him new ways of relating and interacting with other Arab MSM. For Adel, his navigation of the online space and a renewed devotion to Islam has allowed him to reconcile aspects of his identity that he initially saw as being in binary opposition, and for Jassim it serves as a façade that enables him a degree of protection when exploring his sexual desires, and a playful environment that opens up new interactions with other same-sex desiring Arabs.

In my introduction I provided a brief overview of some of the ways in which same-sex desire is being brought up in relation to Islamic cultures and Arab people, calling on us to begin think of religion beyond narratives that state: “good gays reject religion”, “religion is anti-gay” and “religious gays must reclaim the institutions they seek to occupy” (Bowen & Early, 2002; Yavus, 2003; Barrett, 2005; Kugle, 2014). As I have shown, the cultures of faith occupied by Arab MSM are complex and play a substantial role in the everyday life and understandings of my subjects. How we will be able to extend our critiques is by recognising the way in which it has become incorporated in their everyday lives today. Religion is occupying a space in Arab MSM digital spaces in messages rhapsodising about fire and damnation and those that are followed by a wink emoji and a nude. Allowing for our conceptions to make space for anything less would simply be too reductive.

Chapter 5: Talking Gay: The Linguistic Patterns of Arab MSM

Introduction: Examining Specificity

Dedicating a chapter to the examination of language in a thesis about the confluence of Arab MSM identities in the online space struck me as an obvious choice at the onset of my writing. Indeed, elsewhere in the thesis, I already broached this subject matter when discussing the ways in which language is being manipulated in the online performances of Arab MSM as they navigate cultural notions of Arab masculinity and femininity. As I moved into reviewing the data collected from my fieldwork, the need to further examine the emergence of a specific Arab MSM lexicon online became clear to me. My review of these findings resulted in the formation of a question that went on to underpin my writing of this chapter: What does the use of language tell us about how Arab MSM are operating in the world?

Unsurprisingly, the answer to this question is rather involved. In fact, that one question unfurled into many others that at their core point towards the complex, and at times contradictory, ways in which Arab MSM communities are speaking to and for each other. As I will go on to argue, the patterns evident in my subjects' uses of language demonstrate concerns that can be related to the dominant discourses of the sexual cultures of the Arabian Gulf. I will also demonstrate how this developing language is further complicated by their mediations with global discourses of LGBTQ culture and identity – and manifesting in how they communicate their desires online to one another. Ultimately, I argue that this developing Arab MSM lexicon is reflective of how cultures both within and outside of the region are shaping their online presentations of their desiring selves – and how it is reflecting their understanding of themselves as same-sex desiring Arab men.

I also go on to contextualise the dialects of Arab MSM online. To do so, I focus my attention on Ahwaa, an online forum established for Arab same-sex desiring individuals throughout the region to converge and connect. My observations of this convergence of individuals moved me towards thinking about their self-definitions and reflecting further on the topics of globalisation and appropriation within Arab MSM communities.

I assert the need for us to contend with our conception of globalisation when seeking to define the understandings and self-definitions of these communities – as its bearing is evident in their linguistic patterns. In doing so however, I also argue for the need to

recognise that new and specific conceptions of Arab MSM selves are taking the ‘global’ out of the ‘gay’. I propose that this reasoning is evidenced in my review of ‘insulated’ Arab MSM communities and through the examination of declarative language used in profile texts on geo-locative apps. A conscious engagement with globalising messaging about sexual identities can be read in the linguistic patterns emerging in these software applications. Therefore, I suggest we move towards thinking about how specific local cultural anxieties about gendered and sexual identities might reframe global identities once appropriated by Arab MSM.

At the root of this argument is the work done by William Leap and Tom Boellstorff in *Speaking in Queer Tongues: Globalization and Gay Language* (2004). Leap and Boellstorff discuss language as a tool that can be used to shape identities and communities. Importantly, they meld into their writing the notion of language as indicative of evolving cultural ideologies. This is perhaps most evident when they examine the local and global interchanges of ‘same-sex desires, subjectivities, and communities’ happening when one system of gay or lesbian language comes into contact with another (ibid., pg. 4). Accordingly, my analysis was influenced by the theorists’ assertion that the flow of exchange of information is not unidirectional (from a Western ‘centre’ to periphery). Rather, I join them in conceiving of this exchange as being in constant flux and reshaped by the contexts that individuals occupy:

“Globalization appears to be making the world more different just as much as it is making the world more the same. It all depends on the culturally contextual rubrics used to decide what constitutes difference and similarity. Difference is not an acultural, ahistorical attribute but the forging of cultural distinctions in particular contexts and power relations.” (ibid., pg. 18)

Leap & Boellstorff argue for specificity. They seek to highlight the ways in which these cultures’ own contexts inform how language (and the ideologies that this language represents) is adapted and appropriated to form new meanings relevant to the everyday lives of same-sex desiring people.

In crafting this plea to examine specificity, the work of Gilbert Herdt and his conception of sexual cultures is brought to the fore. Herdt defines sexual cultures as:

“A consensual model of cultural ideal about sexual behavior in a group. [It] suggests a world view based on specific sexual and gender norms, emotions, beliefs and symbolic meanings regarding the proper nature and purpose of sexual encounters. Sexual cultures thus function as power systems of moral and emotional control.” (Herdt 1997, pg. 17)

Leap and Boellstorff adapt Herdt’s framing of sexual cultures to suggest that individuals are tied together through shared understandings of the ideologies and systems they are operating in. They contend that if there are sexual cultures then there must be a sexual language. Through this language individuals express the ideologies relevant to their sexual culture and reflect how it might be contributing to their self-conceptions:

“studying sexual languages ... draws attention to the tensions between sexual politics (that is, the social contestation of sexual ideologies and practices) and sexual desires and to the effects these tensions have on a speaker’s understandings of his or her own sexual subjectivity.” (Leap and Boellstorff, 2004, pg. 13)

As I will go on to show, the realities of Arab MSM sexual subjectivities, language and non-heteronormative conceptions are indeed local, specific and self-defined. To do so, I examine data from interviews along with observations of interactions on the forum Ahwaa, and the mobile-based platforms Grindr and Hornet. I focus on Ahwaa because it is an offshoot of Majal, a Bahraini founded, and community supported, human rights organisation run by Arab team members throughout the Middle East, India and Mexico. The Ahwaa forum is the LGBTQ focused initiative concerned with advocating for the welfare of Arab same-sex desiring people in the Middle East. My research on the Ahwaa forum comprised of logging the frequency of certain words used in the topic titles of threads during a two-week period. These titles provided immediate clarity regarding the words most frequently claimed by users as identities, and the language that would most likely illicit a response. Additionally, I also logged the frequency of words recurring in user responses and the contexts that they were used. This gave me insight into how users presented their identities to one another in a public forum.

My decision to observe data on Grindr and Hornet came about as a direct response to the data collected from the Ahwaa forum. It emerged as vital for me to consider how my findings from the Ahwaa forum could be expounded upon when observing this community in a different context. Thus, my observation process was replicated to its closest possible analogue. During a two-week period, the locative information of a

smartphone was digitally altered, enabling me to ‘visit’ every GCC country to collect data. I logged the frequency of certain words being used in profile usernames and profile descriptions. This again showed the language that users most frequently laid claim to, while also providing insight into the linguistic practices of users seeking to illicit a response when making declarative statements about their desires and identities. I also logged information related to proximity to urban and rural areas. As issues related to globalisation, westernisation and appropriation emerged as a primary theme, location data aided me in adding further nuance to my findings.

Key Terms

As can be expected, the deployment of language in the spaces listed above is as varied and individualistic as the Arab MSM typing them out. However, a cursory glance at their discussions quickly demonstrates the emergence of a pattern in the lexicon that portends to the deeper ways in which these communities are understanding and presenting themselves. Thus, one possible starting point for our engagement with this subject matter might begin with asking: How are Arab MSM denoting other Arab same-sex desiring men?

While this might initially seem like a simple question, the words used to signify same-sex desiring individuals in the wider Arabic language allow for a wealth of different (and at times clashing) meanings.

One prominent identity signifier that recurred in my data was the word ‘Shath’. This word has specific religious and political connotations and can be related to the word ‘Shetooth’. Translated, the words can be defined in English as: ‘distorted, perverse or rogue’. These words find their etymological root in texts related to the Islamic mystical tradition of Sufism. In these texts, the word ‘shath’ denotes outrageous religious utterances made at the height of ecstasy (Shihab, 2011, pg. 198). Initial opinions were split on how these utterances might be understood, and so the word became controversial within Sufism and other branching Islamic literary spheres (ibid). The consensus, however, ultimately settled on interpreting these utterances as stemming from ‘when [one’s consciousness] were from Satan’ (ibid. pg. 200). The etymological history aside, the cultural origin of the word defined it in relation to ideas of a deviant, unruly and dangerous sexuality. (Aburawa, 2009; Henry, 2013; AdvocatesForYouth, 2019)

The definition of ‘shath’ has only slightly shifted since its inception. Similar ideas of deviant and dangerous sexuality are conjured when the word is deployed in the Arabian region today.

Indeed, the word is frequently utilised in mainstream news coverage of people being framed as a risk to the Arab public (Jaber, 2018). For instance, an article in the Moroccan online magazine ‘Barlamane’ prominently featured the word in reference to the arrest of a man’s attempted self-immolation in Rabat, Morocco (Barlamane, 2017). In regard to the cultural discourse of the Gulf region, an article in the ‘Gulf Daily News’, Bahrain’s

most popular newspaper, featured the following (translated) headline: ‘The Newest Way to Smuggle Drugs, an Asian Migrant Brings in Drugs to the Country via a Sensitively Placed Condom’. Foreignness, sexuality and danger are signposted here. The article itself goes on to prominently the word ‘shath’ in a paragraph about the danger this man’s presence poses to the Arab public - due to his drug use, sexuality, and sexual health:

“
 وكان ضابط الجمارك بمطار البحرين اشتبه في المتهم عند قدومه فتم تحويله إلى المسار الأحمر وبتفتيشه
 ذاتيا عثر بطيات ملابسه الداخلية التي يرتديها على واق ذكري محشو بداخله 218 جراما من المؤثرات
 العقلية ملفوفة بشكل أسطواني، حيث اعترف المتهم بأنه يتعاطى المواد المخدرة منذ 10 سنوات وكشف
 عن شذوذه الجنسي ومرضه بالإيدز
 “

Translated:

“Customs officials were suspicious of the man upon his arrival. He was subsequently transferred to the red lane and searched. A condom was found on his person containing 218 grams of mind-altering substances wrapped in a cylindrical shape. The man confessed to being a drug user for 10 years, revealed his (shath)/deviant sexuality and that he had AIDS. “

(GDN, 2019)

Another notable example can be read in ‘Alkhaleej Online’. Established in 2014, the publication is based in the United Kingdom but markets itself as a trustworthy news source being led by journalists in the Gulf region of the Middle East - and seeks to specifically cater to a readership in the Arabian Gulf. An article posted in January of 2019 was titled “كيف يحوّل الإنترنت "الأفعال الشاذة إلى حالة اعتيادية؟” [Translated: “How does the internet normalise (shath)/perverse sexualities?”]. The article goes on to assert that same-sex desire is related to rampant sexual violence and risk, before arguing that the proliferation of the internet is popularising this “shath” sexuality amongst Arab people and culture. (Ahmed, 2019) A multitude of anxieties is woven into this one word and subsequently disseminated by some of the most respected and popular news sources in the region. When it features in the Arab cultural discourse it is weaponised, and when intentionally deployed it is to conjure stigma, signify deviance, and serve as a warning of danger to the Arab public.

Social media demonstrates that the narrative has been associated with the word is still in play. One prominent example can be seen in the Twitter feed of Mohamad al-Arefe, a

Saudi Salafi cleric who is a member of the Association of Muslim Scholars and the Muslim World League. Al-Arefe is an immensely popular Twitter user in the region, boasting 20.3 million followers at the time of writing. He has denigrated the mere fact of same-sex desire by recalling the story of Lot's people in Islamic teaching and argued for the use of the terms 'shethooth' and 'shath' as descriptors specifically because of their etymological roots. He has also posted about the supposed threat of 'shethooth' to Islamic and Arab societies. (00:00:23, 2011, *فتوى حكم الشذوذ الجنسي*).

This weaponisation of the word is made even more clear when considering how it has recently been deployed in relation to the modern geopolitical tensions of the region. For instance, there has been a noticeable increase in the deployment of 'shaths' and 'shetooth' in propaganda targeting the country of Qatar. For context, the modern Qatar diplomatic crisis can be traced back to the mid-90s when the country began making moves to establish itself as a political power in the Middle East that might rival Saudi Arabia (Fisher, 2017). Conflicts began escalating in the 2010s following the events of the Arab Spring, when Qatar opposed Saudi Arabia and aligned its interest with revolutionaries operating in the region. This culminated in tensions reaching their peak in 2017 when GCC member countries Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain announced their severing of diplomatic ties. These countries were soon joined by Egypt, Jordan, the Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti, the Comoros, the Tobruk-based Libyan government and the Hadi-led Yemeni government. Qatar's alleged support for terrorism and frustrations with the Qatar based and funded Al-Jazeera news organisation were cited as reasonings for this diplomatic breakdown – leading to the limiting of economic, political and societal relations with the country (ibid.). Most relevant to this chapter is the media ban in place in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, that continues to block access to Qatari news agencies. Additionally, the UAE and Bahrain has moved to criminalise the expression of sympathy for Qatar on social media, or in any other written, visual or verbal form. Those who violate this censorship face between 3-15 years imprisonment and a fine. (DeYoung, 2017)

A search of the word 'شاذ' (shath) will bring up multiple articles produced by news outlets from the broader Arabian gulf region lamenting the 'epidemic' of same-sex desire in Qatar. Similarly, we see the word deployed by news outlets from non-Gulf Arab countries who aligned themselves with the anti-Qatari sentiment emanating from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE. For instance, Egypt's LTC TV has made a recurring segment out of the idea of a Qatari and Israeli campaign to encourage 'shethooth' in

Egypt. (LTCTV, 2018). In the region, ‘Shath’ and ‘Shethooth’ remain loaded terms that are deployed to denote ideas of sexual danger, deviance, and violence towards the Arab public. Its place in current everyday life frames same-sex desire as an existential risk and imagines a shadowy collective bent on the destruction of Arabian society.

In contrast to ‘Shath’, ‘Mithli’ is a word that emerged more recently and can be translated as meaning ‘of the same’ or ‘like me’. The word has taken root in the region as an attempt to translate the word ‘homosexual’ and is seemingly becoming more common in the lexicon of the sexual cultures occupied by Arab MSM in the Middle East. Notably, within mainstream news media we see the word being used to denote same-sex desiring individuals in the context of progressive activist work. For instance, a 2017 article in AlMadina was titled:

‘بعد اتهامها بالإساءة للرجال ودعم المثليين الفنانة هند البحرينية ترد.. فيديو’

Translated: ‘After Being Accused of Abusing Men by Supporting the Mithli the Bahraini artist Hind Responds in a Video’
(Al Madina, 2017)

An article published by the Arab News Network in 2019 offers up an interesting contrast to how ‘shath’ is deployed in comparison to the word ‘mithli’. Written by Muhammed Bu Juma, the article is titled:

“حقيقة إشهار جمعية لـ"الشواذ جنسيا" في الكويت.. حوار مع "شاذ" كويتي”

Translated: “The Truth About the Most Famous ‘Shath’ Group in Kuwait ... in Dialogue with a Kuwaiti ‘Shath’” (Bu Juma, 2019)

Curiously, Bu Juma refers to same-sex desiring people as ‘shath’ only once in the article, choosing instead to switch his denotation of same-sex desiring people to ‘mithli’. The article contextualises these words in a broader discussion with an interviewee about the aims of a group pushing for ‘mithli rights’ in Kuwait. While the general tone of the article suggests an attempt by the interviewer to remain impartial, the title deploys the word ‘shath’ to court readers through controversy. Comparatively, the interviewees’ care to refer to same-sex desiring people using the terms ‘mithli’ demonstrates a desire to deploy the newer and less inflammatory Arab MSM lexicon.

The word ‘mithli’ filtered into the mainstream lexicon following the discussions that same-sex desiring Arabs have been engaging in online (Naber, 2002). There is an attempt

being made to open up a less charged avenue for the conception of same-sex desiring Arabs by a non-same sex desiring Arab culture. Given that its meaning highlights an idea of similarity and sameness, ‘mithli’ also intends for the persons deploying it to think of Arab same-sex desiring identities in terms of a collective. This carries links to Michel Foucault’s description of the emergence of the concept of homosexuality, who writes ‘The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.’ (1976, pg. 101). Foucault also suggests:

“As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical object of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.” (ibid. pg. 42 – 43)

In ‘mithli’ we see a similar process of a personage being crafted around Arab same-sex desiring people. The word seeks to signify more than sexual desire – it points towards an individual identity and a community pushing for progressive understandings and policies. However, I note that it is also a word being that was initially modelled after established Western definitions. It can be argued that a person laying claim to the word is engaging in a complex form of appropriation, and indeed at the core of those progressively identifying with ‘mithli’ are messages we can relate to Western discourses of pride and identity. However, I remind us here of Boellstorff and Leap and their discussion of the local and global interchanges of subjectivities (2004, pg. 4). ‘Mithli’ is an example of how the implementation and understandings of seemingly familiar messages are ultimately rooted in the cultural specificity of my non-Western subjects. It is imperative that we foreground this fact when working to understand how Arab MSM communities are working to stitch together the varying cultures they occupy to craft new realisations of their same-sex desiring self.

Redefining ‘Gay’s: Affirmation

“In many cases [...] linguistic practices are indeed part of the speaker’s sense of selfhood, can affect the broader social context, and thereby have impact on the subjectivities of other individuals – gay, straight, or otherwise- who are not competent in such linguistic practices.” (Boellstorff & Leap, 2004, pg. 8)

Foucault wrote that the act of defining the homosexual in the nineteenth century meant that ‘[n]othing [going] into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality’ (1976, pg. 43). Thus, the ‘homosexual’ became more than just descriptor of a practice, but rather how we conceive of an identity. Boellstorff and Leap’s extend that argument to suggest that the linguistic practices that emerged around the ‘homosexual’ allowed for those laying claim to that identity to communicate their selfhood. Therefore, I postulate that how and where Arab MSM are communicating their identities is significant.

As I briefly mentioned in my introduction, the Ahwaa forum is an offshoot of Majal, a Bahrain based, and community supported, human rights organisation run by Arab team members throughout the Middle East, India and Mexico. The forum is an online open discussion platform launched in 2011 and populated by over six thousand registered users as of the year 2020. Users sign up after being encouraged to create a pseudonym and a custom cartoon avatar. The forum’s interface is inspired by game mechanics, as user contribution to the platform are judged by their forum peers on the basis of their helpfulness and positivity. Users deemed helpful are awarded points by those peers to indicate their level of participation and supportiveness. The points also unlock further features of the forum which enable users to create chatrooms, access different parts of the website and private message. In relation to the forum’s goals of securing its users, the forum implements data encryption to an interface that aims to insulate Ahwaa’s LGBT Arab participants by creating a ‘community-powered defense system’ (Majal.org, 2020. N.p). In defining Ahwaa’s mission statement, the forum’s parent organisation website states:

“LGBT youth felt increasingly isolated, distant, and depressed. To escape this loneliness, we placed ourselves at risk by resorting to unsecure tools to communicate with each other. With so many young LGBT people across the Middle East and North Africa region embracing the web, we saw an opportunity to create an interactive platform that connected this community in an anonymous and supportive space.” (ibid.)

In Ahwaa, users also have the option of choosing to participate in an English language (Ahwaa ELV) or an Arabic language version (Ahwaa ALV) of the forum. I noted that a different userbase would congregate in each respective version of the forum, based on their linguistic practices and language preferences, resulting in a relatively segregated community. This in turn resulted in stark differences in how each userbase would linguistically affirm their identities within these respective digital spaces.

For instance, in response to a thread started in Ahwaa ELV asking how people understand their gay identity in relation to their religious beliefs, User A responded:

'It's difficult, but you have to have a sense of humour about it. I feel guilty but at the same time I know I'm a good [man and] a good Muslim. The rest is up to someone else. 3ala Allah.'

User A's reply illustrates some of the shared linguistic characteristics amongst Ahwaa ELV's userbase. Their command of the English language, and their use of British English, indicate that they were educated in the British private school sector – a dominant schooling form amongst the Arab upper-middle class (Bahandari, 2018). Meanwhile, '3allah Allah' is an Islamic phrase that translates to 'It is up to God'. However, the way User A writes it is an example of Arabizi. Arabizi is both a form of macaronic language and Arabic dialect in which Arabic is transcribed in a combination of Latin script, the English language and Arabic numerals. It is primarily employed by younger Arab individuals educated in the private school system (El Zein, 2016). The proliferation of it in Ahwaa ELV once again suggests the userships' links to the Arab upper-middle class. It has been argued that children raised with a certain level of social and economic privilege in the region tend to grow up with greater familiarity with the cultures of Western expat children (who often make up a majority of these schools' population) (Kantaria, 2016).

Thus, the topic of code-switching bears some relevance here. Howard Giles et al. (1987) proposes that code switching is a phenomenon that can be explained by what is termed 'accommodation theory'. They argue that a speaker seeks the approval of the listener by modifying their speech. However, Myers-Scotton (1993) argues that there needs to be no

social motivation behind code-switching and proposes that social convention is the underlying reason.

So, we could argue User A's shift to Arabizi is a result of the specific conventions that the digital environment they are occupying in Ahwaa ELV is exposing. This approach to code-switching suggests that this space populated by Arab MSM invites the user to turn to Arabizi when seeking to connect over discussions of sexuality and religion. With this in mind, we see that the modification User A employs is making use of a manipulated religious phrase to pacify the religious anxieties inherent to the topic. This connects both parties by affirming their shared sexual, cultural and religious identities relevant to their discussion. The user's manipulation of language here serves to address this specific anxiety in a way that speaks to the fact that they are two Arab MSM in dialogue.

These linguistic tactics for affirmation are also prominent in the language and framings of other users on Ahwaa ELV. For instance, in an opening post titled 'I had a homophobic family so I moved out', User B writes:

'I distanced myself from my family for a few months before I was able to face them again. For almost a year every time I saw them it was very awkward until I confided in a few siblings that I was gay and in a relationship. It of course did not take them by surprise and some were actually supportive because they realise how hard my life has been living in a family that belittled and abused me each day because of who I am. I wouldn't have been able to do this if I did not take the necessary steps to create a new life for myself. Sometimes serious time alone is what a person needs to recover from these things'

In a later comment on the thread he adds:

'Hi [...] I am [...] ... 36 ... male ... gay bottom ... I am proud'

With Kantaria's argument about the proximity of wealthy Arabs to Western expat communities in mind, User A and User B's commentary is striking due to how their preoccupation with affirmation aligns with Western discourses of LGBT pride and 'the closet' (Seidman, 2013; Jay and Young, 1992). User B's pride is related in his description of the experience of making his sexual desires external to those around him - and his concurrent desire to find acceptance through this act.

A similar point can be made in relation to how User A frames the statement “*I know I’m a good [man and] a good Muslim. The rest is up to someone else*”. Both users communicate a sense of pride in their identities, with User A using the Ahwaa space to proudly represent himself as a gay Arab Muslim amongst other Arab MSMs.

A similar theme emerged in my own discussions with Arab MSM in the fieldwork portion of my research, particularly when I was speaking to Arab MSM who specifically identified as ‘gay’ and were educated within the British private school sector. For example, in my conversation with Ghanam (23 years old, Kuwaiti) he states:

“Telling my brothers was the scariest thing. They don’t talk about it but they stopped making comments, so that made it worth it ... I’m going to tell my parents too. I’m tired of hiding it from them ... I just want to be proud and out and happy”

Like the aforementioned users, Ghanam frames his identity around a narrative of being ‘proud and out’. This suggests that a certain subset of young and upper-middle class Arab MSM who are finding value in identifying with Western narratives of ‘pride’ and in the externalisation of a claimed ‘gay’ identities in the Arabian Gulf region. These individuals reject the implications of identities such as ‘shath’ in favour of embracing of the term ‘gay’ as they seek to redefine it. In the context of their conceptions, ‘gay’ is located within the potentials they imagine for their Arab identity. Thus, allowing them to incorporate the narratives of pride into a conception of their Arab gay self and future in the Arab Gulf.

Redefining ‘Gay’s: Appropriation

The linguistic practices of Ghanam and Users A and B indicate some of the ways in which certain subsets of Arab MSM communities are conceiving of their identities in relation to various the converging sexual cultures they occupy. However, it would be prudent for us to reflect further on the complex ways in which these Quasi-Western narratives are being incorporated into both their lexicon and the ideologies that underpin it. Elsewhere in this thesis (see Chapter 2: Literature Review) I discussed the work of Joseph Massad (2008), whose postcolonial analysis of same-sex desire proposes that language, identities and cultural definitions are being shaped by ‘Western male white-dominated’ activist forces forming a ‘Gay International’ (2007, pg. 160). In his book, Massad recontextualises the work of scholars such as Neil Miller (1992), Dennis Altman (1997), and Barry Adam, Jan Duyvendak and Andre Krouwel (1999), amongst many others, to sound an alarm about the globalisation of gay cultures. He warns non-Western same-sex desiring people away from adopting Western terms and understandings, suggesting that to do so is to reject their own cultures’ sexual history.

In my own fieldwork I often had to contend with the looming figure of the West in the everyday experiences of Arab MSMs. For instance, earlier in this thesis I discuss how same-sex desire is being actively imagined as a Western import by an Arab mother taunting her son for his perceived lack of masculinity. The perceived influence of the West on Arab sexuality is a source of consistent anxiety in the Arab region, and indeed also in academic discussions of non-Western sexualities. While the examples in this chapter have thus far highlighted their possible influence, I am calling on Massad, Altman and my own writing to pivot us into recognising the complex realities of how the West is actually operating in Arab MSM lives today.

Susana Peña’s (2004) examination of gay Cuban American men in Miami, Florida offers a vital intervention into this discussion. She argues for scholarship to begin reflecting on the phenomenon of non-English speakers adopting English definitions through the lens of transculturation. This word was coined by Cuban ethnomusicologist and culture researcher Fernando Ortiz as a means of examining Cuba’s cultural evolution. He writes that transculturation is the process of: “Transition from one culture to another, and its manifold social repercussions.” (1995, pg. 98)

While Ortiz's definition frames this exchange of information as unilateral, Peña does not entertain the argument that Cuban same-sex communities are dependent on the teachings of Western forces. Rather, she examines how the convergence of various cultures influence the ways in which sexual identity is shaped, adopted and understood by the people who claim it. Indeed, she makes a point of stressing that non-Anglo European men's use of terms such as 'gay' does not indicate that they are using the term in the same way as other gay communities: "In Miami, a process of transculturation is occurring that has changed the meaning of identification terms such as 'gay'." (ibid. pg. 246)

Peña's work informs much of my own attitude towards the assumed influence of Western gay globalisation Massad is warning his readers about. For instance, I have asserted that the linguistic practices of Arab MSM indicate that the discourses of 'pride' and 'visibility' are slowly emerging as important factors in the identity configurations of a young and economically privileged subset of the Arab MSM community. Additionally, I have posited that their claiming of the term 'gay' speaks more to their attempts to localise it within the potentials of their Arab identity than it does with their allegiance to Western ideologies. I propose that it would be reductive for us not to recognise how the seemingly familiar is developing in culturally specific ways.

In other words, these terms should perhaps be uprooted from their Anglo contexts. This would enable us to recognise that when an Arab MSM, in the Arab gulf, is using the terms 'gay', 'proud' and 'out' it is in relation to his specific sociohistorical and geographical experience - the digital environments that he is occupying. As Leap and Boellstorff assert, the subjectivity of our subjects must be recognised regardless of their experiences with, or proximity to, Western cultures and thought. (Leap and Boellstorff, 2004, pg. 13) Acknowledging that allows us to see how this subjectivity reshapes the meaning of these words and narratives.

Hence, an Arab MSM affirming 'gay' and 'mithli' as an identity, is invariably doing so purposely and with an awareness of established terminology such as 'Shath'/'Shaz'. For instance, take these two comments by Users C and D when discussing their preferred terminology:

User C states:

"I don't even see the word 'gay' as my favourite, as I think that homosexual is a better word. Pervert or 'Shaz' is a word among many that the average people use to disregard and sexually discriminate against homosexuals. But definitely, a bilingual forum like Ahwaa, even if it reaches the elite who have an Internet cable, is important in that regard to alter the prevailing populist mentality about homosexuals a little bit. Be good!"

User D:

"Homosexuality is a taboo in most Arab societies, and even when discusses [sic] it is summed up in two words: unhealthy sin. In most discussion we had with men of religion, Muslims and Christians, the Arabic word 'shaz' was the only word to describe a homosexual... Meanwhile, the word 'gay' has entered the spoken language, mostly because of American Films and TV shows, and is used frequently by educated young people."

User C acknowledges the proliferation of multiple terms that refer to sexuality, claiming the English 'homosexual' as his preference. User D argues that the proliferation of the word 'gay' is due to the influence of Western media and to the privy of the young. However, their explanation of the position of 'Shath'/'Shaz' within Arab society demonstrates the conscious linguistic work being attempted to replace the word from the common lexicon of these online spaces (and speaks to the power that has been conferred to them). By extension, this demonstrates the conscious effort being undertaken to confront the specific sexual cultures and contextual histories these Arab MSM are in. Thus, marking these tactics as new, albeit familiar, tools intended for the dismantling of the masters' house (1984, Lorde).

I also note the fact that the use of the term 'homosexual' has been long contested in the West due to its '[immersion] in the politics of state control of individuals and their resistance to that control' (Zimmerman, 2000, pg.378). User C's claiming of the word speaks to an understanding that is based around a different cultural relationship to Western terminology. The meaning of these terms is not static or dependent on Western discourses, rather they are being reshaped when appropriated by individuals in this region. This in turn applies to narratives that one might be inclined to simply brand as products of the 'Gay international' (Massad, 2008).

Moreover, in my interview with Talal (24, Bahrain) he made this pointed remark:

“I’m gay, that’s what I use because you know what it means if you’re gay or not. Not everyone knows what ‘Mithli’ means, and ‘Shath’ isn’t something I really want to call myself or anyone else.”

Talal stresses the importance of his linguistic practices due to how it might be understood by the wider communities he occupies. User D similarly contextualises his identity within a wider community. As shown above, when claiming ‘gay’ as an identity it is partly to align himself with ‘educated young people’. However, he goes on to also add:

“It is knowing that we’re not alone in this and that there’s a supportive community here that I can just vent out everything to without feeling guilty or judged.”

The incorporation of Western terminology is part of an active process that allows users to affirm their specifically Arab same-sex desiring identities and experiences. These narratives are transformed due to the subjectivity of our subjects. As in the case of Talal, it means framing his Arab sexual identity so that it is legible to other Arab MSM first (and legible to non-Arabs MSM second). For User D, it allows him to be legible while also connecting him to a supportive community of his peers.

To conclude this section, it might also be worth turning to Ross Higgins’ writing about North American gay male communities when stating:

“[there is a] growing awareness among gay men in urban North America after 1945 that they belonged to a large social group which shared a common language, symbolic systems, interests, and values distinct from those of the surrounding society.” (1999, pg. 191).

The formation of community, or a desire for a community, ordered around users’ understandings of their sexual desires is not exclusive to the West (Stein, 2004). It would ring false for us to argue that any familiarity observed in the narratives and languages of non-Western MSM communities primarily signify an allegiance to Western same-sex desiring cultures. Instead, I propose we view this act of appropriation as speaking to a community that is developing its own specific linguistic tactics in response to the sexual cultures they occupy.

Defining ‘Communities’: Division

In relation to globalisation and same-sex desiring communities, one underexplored avenue of this research is the ways in which our subjects are discussing this topic. In a post made on Ahwaa ELV, User E demonstrates how references to the global ‘LGBT community’ are being framed:

“I have been watching A-List: New York and it’s hell of an offensive show! It portrays bottoms as girly queens, singles as materialistic lustful vain individuals and manly (yet flirty) masculine tops as sex machines! Is this what the LGBT community calls for? Is that why many gay guys are still single and many lesbians are asking for a cover marriage?”

User E questions their belonging to the representation that this media text affords him, and his mention of ‘cover marriage’ points to how generalising our comparisons of the issues different communities are currently navigating might be. In response to his statement, User F argues a similar point:

“I think it’s hard to say ‘this is what the LGBT group thinks and feels’ because we are incredibly different from each other, culturally, socially, psychologically, physically, and any other way you can imagine, each is their own person regardless of their sexuality in the end.”

By contemplating the discussions taking place in the Ahwaa ALV, the linguistic practices of this community of same-sex desiring Arabs posting in parallel can further deepen our understandings of how language shapes identity in the Arab MSM space. Of particular interest is the way in which the linguistic patterns of users in Ahwaa ALV communicate a sexual subjectivity that seems in opposition to Ahwaa ELV. Like in its sister forum, users in Ahwaa ALV often debate the terminology being claimed by their same-sex desiring communities. For example, in the following two figures User G states:

المثليين ... ويا الله ... ما أكثر المتذمرين المضجرين!

[Figure 2. Translation: ‘Mithlis ... my God ... the most boring whiners and complainers!’]

انا شاذ من راسى وحتى قدمى

[Figure 2. Translation: *'I am Shath from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet.'*]

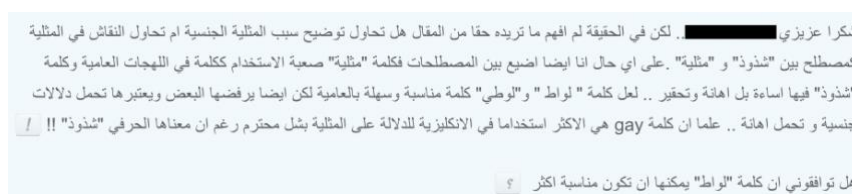
I noted the general lack of consensus in the terminology being claimed by users in Ahwaa ALV. Additionally, I was struck by how the claiming of 'mithli' was generally met with ambivalence unless it is brought up by those laying claim to 'shath' as a marker of their same-sex desiring self. When compared with Ahwaa ELV, this indicates that the userbase congregating in Ahwaa ALV do not as cleanly align with any specific identity signifier. Rather, the linguistic practices in this forum point towards divisions in the self-definitions of Arab MSM more comfortable using the Arabic language to communicate their sexual subjectivities.

For instance, User H responds to User G with the following:



[Figure 3. Translation: *'Hello dear The word 'Shath' is derogatory and incredibly insulting. I wish you would replace it with the word 'mithli'*]

User G goes on to reply:



[Figure 4. Translation: *'Thank you dear ... To be honest I don't understand what you intended with this post. Are you trying to define same-sex attraction? Or are you trying to clarify the distinction between the words 'mithli' and 'shath'? Either way, I also get lost with the terminology. The word 'mithli' is hard to use in common language, but the word 'shath' is somehow insulting and abusive. Perhaps the word 'Lut' or 'Luti' would be more appropriate as it is easier to use in general company. Although some also reject it and think it is too gendered and insulting. The word 'gay' is the most commonly used*

in the English language to signify same-sex attraction respectfully, though some say that its literal meaning translates to 'shethooth'!!! Do you agree with me that 'Luti' might be the most appropriate? ']

[Note: Lut/Luti is word that etymologically references the prophet Lut in the Qur'anic variation of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the Quran this story is traditionally interpreted as a warning against same-sex desire and sexual practice]

These debates around terminology could point to proliferation of negative connotations generally associated with denotations of same-sex desire in the wider Arab sexual culture - that these men are consistently navigating as Arab MSM who primarily speak in Arabic. We could also relate this context to the inability of progressive leaning terms from fully taking hold. We see evidenced here a subset of Arab MSM who are not aligning with any specific terminology- and the respective identities that they demarcate. In concert with these men, we also see the emergence of a subset of Arab MSM who are actively rebuffing the ways in which their desires are being collectively defined and understood.

Furthermore, notable to the example above is the use of the term 'gay'. Here we see it as a source of debate in much the same way the term 'shath' is. In my interview with Adam (28, Oman) he offers up a perspective that helps in elucidating the reasoning behind this:

"I'm 'mithli'. 'gay' isn't mine and 'shath' is an insult. 'Mithli' is what feels right"

These attempts being made to solidify 'correct' terminology is seemingly borne out of a desire to further define an Arab conception of Arab MSM. The users' rejection of the word 'shath' is a rebuke of a framing of identity that is prejudicial and outdated, while the rejection of 'gay' is a rebuke of a framing that is too generalising. Instead these users are consciously making an effort to shape a community that is separate, unique and united in the Arabness of their sexuality. When I asked Adam to expand on his meaning when saying the word 'gay' is not his he responded by saying:

"If you google the word gay what pictures come up?"

In contrast to my discussion of the userbase in Ahwaa ELV appropriating the term 'gay' and seeking to localise it within their Arab identity, Adam finds it unrepresentative. In

taking his view as symbolic of those I interviewed and observed who primarily communicate with Arab MSM online using the Arabic language, their advocating for the embrace of 'Mithli' is rooted around their desire for representation. The claiming of this term as an identity marker defines it in relation to 'gay', while also marking differences rooted in their various intersections of identity.

We should also note that the linguistic practices of users in Ahwaa ALV seek to highlight the respective posters' individuality. Taking User G as an example, his initial post negatively refers to 'mithliin', the collective form of 'mithli'. He rejects the idea of being subsumed into a collective and the ideology that it represents. Conversely, when claiming the term 'shath' it is in the singular form. Similarly, Adam's dismissal of 'gay' as an identifier is done in opposition to the idea of being subsumed into a generalised collective. In comparison to Ahwaa ALV, the userbase that typifies Ahwaa ELV seemingly seek to signify a belonging to a collective. Ahwaa ALV, on the other hand, presents a subset of the Arab MSM community that understands their belonging to an imagined collective but also defines themselves in relation the distinction of their experiences.

This is further evident when considering the recurrence of the word *me-ool* (Meaning 'inclination') in Ahwaa ALV. For instance, User J makes the following statement about their desired sexual partners:



[Figure 5. Translation: 'An inclination for mithli']

The word *me-ool* is often used on the forum alongside the words *mithli* to signify an individual's inclination towards same-sex desire. However, its use in a sentence alters the context of the word *mithli* away from being a claimed identity, instead casting same-sex desire as a practice. As Ahwaa ALV is a forum that is largely populated by cis-gendered same-sex desiring men, the word *me-ool* is implemented by Arab men who are writing in the Arabic language. For instance, in the above example, User J asks for someone who is inclined towards same-sex sexual practice with *mithli* men. Therefore, indicating that they are seeking a partner considering their desire as separate from the confines of identity.

Indeed, a large number of posts in this forum make use of the word *me-ool* to transform the word *mithli* into being a signifier of a desire, rather than a signifier of identity. This is a narrative that also came up in my interviews. For instance, in my discussion with Saad (Saudi, 27), he states the following:

“I don’t really know what to call myself. Gay, shath or whatever is just a lot. I like what I like. I leave it there.”

Similarly, a significant number of users of Ahwaa ALV code their sexual desires as being an impulse that is being acted on, with these acts only occasionally being related to their identity (Deblaere, 2010). While the same narrative can be observed in Ahwaa ELV, (and in my interviews with Arab MSM who frequently shifted to speaking between English and Arabizi/Arabliish), it seems significant that they framed their sexual desires as a facet of their overall identity.

A separation of sexual desire and identity seems to be an emerging theme that is typified by the Arab MSM in Ahwaa ALV, and this stands in contrast with users in Ahwaa ELV. I come to this conclusion having been bolstered by evidence drawn from my interviews. When reviewing the linguistic practices deployed by my interview participants, particular trends begin to emerge. Amongst younger participants (aged 25 and under) who spoke primarily in English during their interviews, same-sex desire was more likely to be spoken about in relation to a stable identity. By contrast, older interviewees (over 25), who spoke primarily in Arabic, were more likely to speak about their same-sex desires irrespective of their identities – or as a facet of their overall understanding of self. While the relative anonymity of the Ahwaa forum limits my perspective, there appears to be a divide in the way in which the Arab MSM living in the Arab Gulf are folding in categories denoting sexual identity into their sense of self. This division is being communicated through language and is partly based around age and respective familiarities with Western narratives.

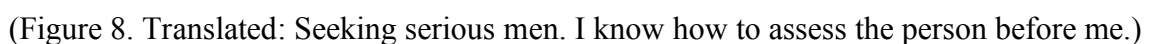
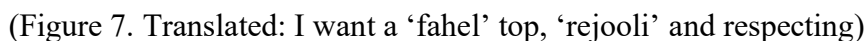
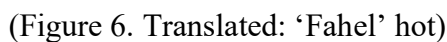
Defining ‘Others’: ‘Jad’ and ‘Fahels’

“Our interactions with others in those spaces, our means of communicating with and through the machine, are not created anew out of whole cloth at each use. Our posts, clicks, swipes, chats, and emoticons are constructed ahead of time for our use. We don’t necessarily act spontaneously from a whole universe of possible actions; rather we make a communicative performance based on the manipulation of a set of acts and symbols. In this way, our actions and the space we are inhabiting becomes intelligible via our relations with others, a set of relations that still allows for improvisation, resistance, cooperation, suggestion, double entendre, and all other manner of strategic communicative acts.” (Crooks, 2013, pg. 5)

My interest in examining the smartphone applications Grindr and Hornet is due to implications of the inherent ephemerality of their interface. Both mediums rely on global positioning system that sorts online profiles into a grid. The physically closer one user is to another, the closer they are on the grid. The populations converging on these spaces are constantly shifting and so tailoring your profile to elicit a response is incentivised for users logging on.

My observations of the users on these apps allowed me to consider how they are responding to this incentive and reflect on what underpins Arab MSM framings of their identity and desires when seeking to interact with one another.

One finding I took away from my observation was that younger Arab MSMs populate the grid on the weekends (on average 3 out of every 5 users listed their ages between the ranges of 18-25). Accordingly, I noted a significant increase in the use of Arabizi in their profile text. The rate with which this language recurred also increased the closer in proximity these users were to the respective countries capital cities during the weekends and was paired with non-linguistic signifiers showcasing the flag of neighbouring GCC countries (Out of an average of 33 younger Arab MSM on a Grindr profile grid in Bahrain showcasing 96 profiles, almost all made use of a flag emoji of a neighbouring GCC country in their profiles.). Naomi Sakr (2007) has discussed the freedom of movement available between GCC countries and considered how citizens of more conservative regimes make use of this freedom to access entertainment that might otherwise be unavailable to them. Thus, the laxer laws and legal attitudes towards drinking and same-sex desire in Bahrain could be argued as a possible explanation for this weekend phenomenon.



البحرين
 ❤️👄 انا بوث للبحرينين بس سعوديين لا يدخلون

(Figure 9. Translated: I'm both, for Bahrainis. Saudis do not contact me.)

Defining ‘Gender’: ‘Rejooli’ & ‘Naem’

Terms used to signify sexual identities (*mithli*, *shath* and *gay*) feature less on mobile based applications than they do in other platforms. This suggests that there is either an assumed understanding of the Arab MSM sexual identities in this space, or the users’ lack of interest in publicly defining their sexual identities. It is also possible that unlike Ahwaa these specific online spaces are primarily used to facilitate the exploration of same-sex desires and do not necessitate a level of personal communication that would involve Arab MSM explicitly detailing their identities in their terminology. It would also be prudent for us to recognise the possible different demographics that might be found on different platforms. Typically, web-based forums (such as Ahwaa) tend to be more popular with older MSM, while smartphone applications tend to be particularly popular with younger MSM (Woo, 2013; Rathus & Nevid, 2019). While I would be careful to suggest that there is a clear division, I also acknowledge that Ahwaa is an older platform that makes a point out of cultivating a close-knit community via its interface. This community could have developed a more localised form of language when referring to their same-sex identities and desires. Meanwhile, we could argue that both the interface and Western origins of the apps I am discussing might accordingly influence the kind of representations (including the linguistic representations) that become normalised on a platform.

One normalised linguistic representation of self that struck me on smart phone applications however is in the use of the term *rejooli* (Meaning masculine/manly). I noted the recurrence of the word as either a self-description or as a desired trait in a partner. [See figure 10].



(Figure 10. Translated: ‘*Rejooli*’, *I don’t want to be contacted by children. Only those respectable and intelligent, my pictures are in private*’)

Confronting the frequency of the word *rejooli* allows us to question what exactly it means in a region where masculinity is so deeply tied with procreation (De Soudy, 2015). We could argue that we see here sexual cultural investment in Arab masculinity, as it relates to the family structure, helping shape how Arab MSM are communicating their idealised sexual desires. Thus, investing in a *rejooli* partner, and self, affords a certain degree of societal value to Arab MSM in living in the Gulf. Similar to users on Ahwaa ALV, sexual desire is not being claimed as an identity. However, the language used here codes same-sex desire as a *me-ool* (or inclination). The emphasis shifts to how gender performance might lend a degree of respectability that subverts cultural expectations of same-sex desiring men. It is evident that Arab MSM are heavily investing in the gender stereotyping of their sexual cultures in their conception of what constitutes an acceptable Arab same-sex desiring self.

Indeed, further evidencing this point is that one notable aspect of profiles featuring the word *rejooli* is that they are less likely to feature a face picture, choosing instead to feature images that might denote Arab masculinity, such as an eagle, exposed chest or a flag (Neumann, et al. 1996; Almashaqba, 2015). On a Grindr grid featuring an average of 58 profiles using the term *rejooli*, 32 profiles featured such imagery. Moreover, I noted that all profiles observed featured the users filled details in optional fields listing their physical specifications, such as: height, weight, ethnicity, sexual position and the type of interaction sought. This further communicates these men's desire to be understood in relation to their masculine physicality, even when their images are not being shared.

The problematic proclamations of masculinity in same-sex desiring spaces has been a frequent topic of reflection within scholarly writing (Dutta, 2014; Dasgupta, 2014; Whitesel, 2014; Sycamore, 2012). However, this particular positioning of masculinity in the Arab MSM spaces is worth further unpacking. In curating their online presentation (and identity) to exhibit the conventional signs of Arab masculinity, these men are seeking to shape their self-representations in relation to the ideals of the Arab heterosexual male 'normalcy' (Seidman, 2002, pg. 49). I propose that the fact they do so without featuring a face picture indicates a desire to preserve that privilege, which runs counter to much of what has been written about the use of face pictures in gay male profiles in the West. This subset of Arab MSM finds value in associating an idea of their Arab masculinity to their Arab sexuality.

Figure 11 shows a man communicating a desire for a sexual and romantic relationship with a ‘rejooli’ man. I would argue that it speaks as much to this emergent impulse in Arab MSM sexual cultures to venerate Arab MSM who could covertly fit into everyday Arab life, as it does to the general problematic framing of Arab MSM effeminacy as undesirable.



(Figure 11. Translated: Kuwait, Qurtuba. Top, Rejooli, 40s, classy. Seeking ‘rejooli’ aged between 18-25)

With this in mind, if we consider ‘rejooli’ as a weapon in the arsenal of men in the Arab MSM digital space, then we can understand these users as adept at marking themselves as sexually and culturally viable partners within this competitive online space.

Further demonstrating this, Figure 11’s contextualisation of *rejooli* in relation to the user’s self-assessed intellect and respectability folds this digital Arab MSM masculinity into classist ideas of ideal Arab masculinities (Al-Samman, 2008). A binary is established in which the contrasting conception to the *rejooli* Arab MSM is one who is unintellectual, scandalous and effeminate. Moreover, the user also emphasises a dislike of immaturity, thereby once again aligning Arab masculinity to elitist notions of intellect and maturity (ibid.) I contend that allegiance to masculinity is to be interpreted as an attempt to approximate an MSM respectability that allows for a space within the hegemonic Arab sexual culture (Whitaker, 2006; Noble, 2007; Naber, 2012; Moghadam & Decker, 2014).

We could relate this to Boellstorff’s (2005, pg. 92) research about manifestations of desires in Indonesia, he writes:

“Both gay men and *lesbi* women speak of their sexualities as a ‘desire for the same.’ This contrasts with the desire for difference characterising the desire of *normal* women for *normal* men, *normal* men for *normal* women, warias for *normal* men, and *normal* men for warias.”

Rejooli (as an idealised Arab MSM masculinity informed here by the regions values) is the nucleus that most Arab MSMs in this space orbit. The sexual interactions in this space are governed around a strict and sexualised performance of where *rejooli* sameness is constructed as a self-affirming social mode worthy of exchanging.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, I also noted *naem* [fragile/soft] as an effeminised Arab MSM identity that being both claimed and desired. [See Figure 12, 13 and 14] This further serves to highlight how the move to geolocate smartphone applications exposes a deepening preoccupation with gendered identities amongst Arab MSM communities.

ناعم وحلو وسالب ممحون مره

[Figure 12. Translation: “*I am naem, sweet, bottom, sexually active and submissive*”]

سالب ناغم تعال خاص اريحكك

[Figure 13. Translation: “*Negative/Bottom naem, message me on private and I’ll serve you*”]

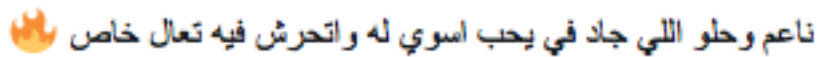
فحل جاد يحب السالب الناعم الرومانسي

[Figure 14. Translation: Stud, serious, I require bottoms who are *naem* and romantic.]

These descriptors are used as binaries to *rejooli* identities and serve as a shorthand to describe a multitude of traits such as: effeminacy, body hair, sexual position, sexual role, age and maturity. It also confers responsibility for finding accommodation to meet. Figures 12 & 13 are sourced from a profile that incorporates the word *raqeek* (synonym for *naem*) in their username, whereas Figure 14 is sourced from user profiles with ‘*rejooli*’ in their username handles. There are two points to be made in the descriptions of these profiles: Firstly, I note that the term *naem* serves as shorthand for how a *rejooli* identifying MSM expects their partner to perform their gender in a sexual situation.

Secondly, I note the power in the exchanges of *rejooli* MSM articulating their desire for *naem* identifying MSM. A specific gender performance is expected and acted out here. We could argue that it is one based on a preconceived sexual and cultural role afforded to those aligned with Arab femininity, such as being private, receptive and servile (Al-Malki, et. al, 2012; Naber, 2012; Wynn, 2006).

However, I would also argue that it demonstrates that it evidences an established power dynamic in the respective understandings of *rejooli* and *naem* claiming men that is predicated on the *rejooli* being afforded sexual authority due to their alignment with culturally accepted modes of being. We must, however, also acknowledge the way in which *naem* men themselves are claiming this language for their own sexual gratification.



[Figure 15. Translation: “*naem and sweet. If you’re serious and want me to serve you message me*”]

The use of *naem* as a claimed Arab MSM identity can be related to existing literature that imagines the liberating possibilities of gendered interactions in cyberspace (Reid, 1996, Danet, 1998). It might also be worth contextualising this in relation to Jodi O’Brien’s (1999, pg. 77) discussion of gender online as a: “Social institution ... [that represents] the primary means by which we sort and define self and others.” On Grindr and Hornet, an existing hyper-gendered Arab discourse is being rearticulated through these profiles seeking interactivity. The influence of the pervading sexual culture of the Arab region, and the specific Arab MSM sexual culture being created online, has transformed a digital space where the inverting and complicating of Arab sex and gender roles is an intrinsic part of the understood dynamics.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I sought to consider the linguistic practices of the Arab MSM at the core of this research. I have their chosen terminology, and observable interactions, to question how their uses of language is particular to their subjectivity as Arab MSM in the Arab region.

I began this chapter by asking: What does the use of language tell us about how Arab MSM are operating in the world? Before going on to write about the myriad of ways in which we could possibly answer that question.

To that effect, I demonstrated how the deep rooted the Arab cultural anxieties over masculinity, I first discuss in Chapter 4, are influencing the interactions of Arab MSM in the online space. The cultural idealisation of Arab MSM has manifested in an attempt by my subjects to craft a conception of their Arab MSM masculinities that seeks to make them desirable to both each other and their culture at large.

Additionally, I have argued that the users in Ahwaa expose the divisions that are forming in conceptions of Arab MSM identities both collectively and as individuals. I assert that while the relevance of globalisation should not be ignored, neither should we neglect our subjects' own mediations with forces we have thus far become too accustomed to conceiving of as wholly overwhelming. At the root of their negotiations with the global gay world is their subjectivity as same-sex desiring people, and I stress that it is this subjectivity that transforms what we would otherwise take as too familiar conceptions of self.

This concern with subjectivity is what guided my observations of the users on Ahwaa ALV and Ahwaa ELV. Their discussions of terminology point us towards the emergent identities that are being debated, reshaped and reframed by Arab MSM in relation to the cultures that they occupy and navigate on a daily basis.

At the beginning of this chapter, I defined the terms that most frequently recurred in my interviews with Arab MSM. I first considered the corrosive etymological implications of the word 'shath' and how it is culturally deployed to subjugate the communities my research focuses on. I then moved on to consider the rise of the word 'mithli' and the ways in which it continues to evolve in relation to the community that first translated it

from the word 'gay'. Due to the specific interface of the platform I have covered I was able to demonstrate what the linguistic practices of Arab MSM showcase the diverse Arab MSM understandings of their same-sex desiring self.

Ultimately, I sought to emphasise the need for us to recognise that Arab MSM cultures are distinct and operate primarily in relation to their own cultural systems. In my effort to do so I adapted Leap, Boellstorff, Peña and Herdt's framework of using language as an entry point to these discussions of identity and community. When writing about the linguistic practices of Arab men in same-sex coded digital spaces we need to be cautious to centre the convergence of cultures, spaces and systems of power that are informing the ways in which these Arab men are performing (and understanding) their respective identities.

Chapter 6: Pride and Shamefulness – Longing, Utopianism and Becoming

Introduction

“Utopias, for example, create aspirations of purity impossible to fulfil, but the implementation of that desired perfection obliges a reiteration of group practices that renews identification for those seeking change. However, the history of social movements also makes clear that groups almost always succumb to the compromising forces of hegemony, inviting dissolution of utopian promise into irreparable demise. “

(Bennet, 2010, pg. 457)

I have thus far in this thesis sought to contextualise my subjects’ in relation to their own narratives of their experiences as Arab MSM living in the Gulf. My interviewees’ perspectives have allowed me to track the themes that are emerging in their framing of their life histories. One such theme indicates a longing for utopian fantasies is underpinning their conceptions of their futures and potentials. Indeed, discursive reflections on LGBTQ lives have also been haunted by narratives of longing and imagined potentials (Berlant, 1991, Muñoz, 2009). Left unaddressed, my thesis can easily be read as a rumination on an underdefined fantastic other, just outside the grasp of Arab MSM. In this chapter, I intend to directly challenge this possible reading by casting a critical eye towards the undercurrent of longing in my interviewees’ words. In examining these narratives, I also call on us to think of how critical reflections on queer futurism, utopianism and potentials might complicate our own understandings of my subjects’ self-conceptions.

In his introduction to ‘Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity’, José Esteban Muñoz begins his contemplation on queer futurity by crafting a definition of what queerness as a temporal modality is, and might one day be, writing:

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.” (Muñoz, 2009, pg. 1)

Taking inspiration from philosopher Ernst Bloch, Muñoz calls for readers to renew their investment in ideas of queer hope and utopia. Considering Bloch’s distinction between ‘abstract utopias and concrete utopias’, Muñoz advocates for a concrete queer utopianism that represents “[t]he hopes of a collective, an emergent group, or even the solitary oddball who is the one who dreams for many.” (ibid. Pg. 3). Muñoz imagines queerness

as a consistent meaning making process that is always out of reach. He, however, does not frame this as a negative, instead seeing in it the potential to be understood as a profound force of change. He argues that the only way for queers to get closer to queerness is by engaging with utopianism as practice, as through such labour we are brought closer to queer utopias.

“Utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labour of making a queerworld” (ibid. Pg. 25)

Elsewhere, Jeffery Bennet discusses utopianism as a means of centring queerness. He writes from a meta perspective by opting to think more broadly about the motivations underpinning the emergence of utopian discourse in discussions about queer lives, stating:

“In its most basic form, utopian discourse seeks to transcend present political conditions and foretells a future free from social ills and cultural constraint. Like the rainbow flag, utopian visions yearn for a polis that celebrates harmony, equity, and thoughtful deliberation.” (Bennet, 2010, pg. 456)

Here, Bennet is concerned with impulse that underlines the writing of those weaving in ideas of utopia into their work. Like Muñoz, Bennet frames it as a by-product of imagining queer hope as an instrument. If we were to take on their perspectives when looking at my interviews with Arab MSMs, we might argue that their invocations of utopianism are as symbolic the rainbow flag or pink triangle. It becomes part of a project of imagining (and inspiring) their own radical progressive potentials.

Bennet and Muñoz are both writing in response to Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Edelman’s manifesto proposes that queer conceptions of the future are operating in a culture that is dominated by the constraints of ‘reproductive futurism’. In his argument for an anti-futurist and anti-utopian queer outlook, Edelman pushes back against a framing of the child as the figure of the future or the “absolute value of reproductive futurism” (ibid. pg. 3). He suggests that futurism is the privy of the heteronormative due to the homosexuals’ inability to reproduce when writing:

“That future is nothing but kid stuff, reborn each day to screen out the grave that gapes from within the lifeless letter, luring us into, ensnaring us in, reality’s

gossamer web. Those queered by the social order that projects its death drive onto them are no doubt positioned as well to recognise the irreducibility of that fantasy and the cost of construing it as contingent to the logic of social organization as such.” (ibid., pg.30)

For Edelman, the queer futurist is working from within the framework of heteronormative dogmas that make no space but to think of them as an endpoint. In other words, the queer agent is individuated in relation to heteronormative conceptions of collective potentials. Bennet and Muñoz’s response takes issue with this individuation. Their conception of queerness instead understands it in relation to collective potentials – thus making space for utopian imaginings and longing.

However, I would argue that these theorists’ interpretations are incomplete. For instance, Bennet’s thoughts on how utopianism often operates in dialogue with apocalyptic imagery calls for a reappraisal:

“Apocalyptic discourse, conversely, cautions that calamity is imminent. While rhetorically inflected readings of apocalypse generally understand the hierarchical and chaotic nature of preordained disaster as leading to a better hereafter, contemporary appropriations of the concept focus on the grim repercussions awaiting humanity.” (Bennet, 2010. pg. 456)

Bennett insinuates that queer utopias are being imagined through anxieties that limit the potentials of queer utopianism. However, I would argue that the experiences of my subjects demonstrate that their utopianism is produced through what can better be thought of as a ‘dual imagining’. The ‘better hereafters’ are being imagined in concert with the ‘grim repercussions’, and it is the process of mediating with both conceptions that is allowing for their imaginings of ‘horizon(s) imbued with potentiality’ (Muñoz 2009; Bennet 2010).

I posit that this dual imagining makes their experienced anxieties productive. Therefore, the shame they relate to me in their experiences is a facet that is key to their self-understandings. To put it another way, shame is a part of their configurations of identity and factors into their imaginings of both individuated and collective utopian potentials.

Sally Munt’s (2019) discussion of gay shame touches on utopianism and helped in further informing my reading of my subjects’ experiences. In ‘Gay Shame in a Geopolitical Context’ she writes:

“The partial success of ‘gay liberation’ over the past 50 years has incurred unforeseen costs. Neoliberalism has embraced and assimilated gay identity, gay markets, gay marriages, and gay/cosmopolitan ‘ghettos’ and synthesized a kind of Frankenstein’s monster: a domesticated homosexual, a version of Wildeblood’s Category C, a man (and sometimes woman), characterized by incorporation via the mechanisms of homonormativity (Duggan 2002), and homonationalism (Puar 2006). This person is keen to capitalize on their fragile inclusion in the national imaginary and sees himself as a person with rights to protect, and an individual selfhood to enhance.” (Munt, 2019, pg. 235)

Munt suggests we should be apprehensive of Arab MSM queer utopian imaginings due to their relation to issues of imperialism, individualism, globalism and ideation.

“The ‘proud’ homosexual of the west is now paired against the ‘shameful’ homophobia of the east, or the global south, a typecasting resonant with postcolonial clichés.” (ibid.)

To that end, there are some very real questions that Munt points us towards. For instance: How do Arab MSM envision a queer utopia? How do Arab MSM relate to established narratives of queer utopias? What does homonormativity look like for Arab MSM outside of the West?

In thinking more broadly about how utopianism relates to the structures of Munt’s postcolonial interests, I find myself driven towards reflecting on the dangers of trying to apply our understandings of Western queer neoliberal utopianism to the understandings my subjects. For instance, central in Munt’s conception of the ‘Frankenstein’s monster’ is shame, which I have thus far proposed can serve as key to my subjects’ imaginings of their potentials. While her writing ultimately does ask us to think of the productivity of shame, her framing also codes the resulting imaginings as entwined to the ideals of Western neoliberalism. She allows for a reading of their narratives as reinforcing postcolonial archetypes that set up the western homosexual and the eastern homosexual as binaries. In this binary, shame is a tool that ultimately strengthens colonial powers and seeks to oppress Eastern homosexuals.

However, I feel the need to be careful as to not fully adopt this viewpoint. Sally Munt’s conception of the homosexual in the East, in relation to the Western ‘Frankenstein’s Monster’, runs the risk of refolding shame back onto the figure itself. Such an interpretation of queer utopian imaginings would suggest that navigating cultural shame serves as the focal point for same-sex desiring people around the world to orient their

process of becoming around. Thus, this might lead us into reading the utopian longings in the narratives of my interviewees as denoting shame as the only defining aspect of their MSM conceptions. This casts a broad and negative light on their understandings of self, their desires and their experiences. It erases the complexities of hope, joy and negotiation for Arab MSM living in the Gulf that Munt affords her Western same-sex desiring subjects in *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2004). Furthermore, it prevents us from fully contemplating the ways in which shame might be productive to their own specific utopian imaginings, as Bennet and Muñoz suggest, on both a personal and cultural level. (Bennet, 2010; Muñoz, 2009)

Richard Taulke-Johnson comes up against some of these topics in “Queer decisions? Gay male students’ university choices”. His study considered the choices made by queer students’ when deciding which universities to attend. He writes:

“The influence of participants’ sexuality on their university choices was most apparent in their stories of geographic displacement from their family homes and communities – both in terms of moves *from* spaces and people viewed or experienced as gay intolerant and repressive, and/or moves *towards* an environment (be it a specific university or its locale) perceived as being gay-friendly, supportive and accepting. These ‘mobility decisions’ (Christie 2007, 2445) were a highly significant characteristic of my participants’ university choices, being a means by which they ‘remapp[ed] their worlds and their places in it’ (Knopp 2004, 123), and one of the ways in which their selection processes were queered.” (Taulke-Johnson, 2010, pg. 252)

Taulke-Johnson’s work relates more so to Muñoz framing of queerness as a constant process that is being worked towards. Students ‘remapp[ed] their worlds and their places in it’, striving towards the imagined potentials of queerness (Knopp 2004, pg. 123. Cited in *ibid.*). It presents these mobility decisions as a reaction towards the provocations of personal and cultural shame that are tied to students’ queer becoming. What is significant is how these decisions are informed by the realities of their experiences. They feed into a utopian image of their individual queer selves – and their queer futures – and moves them to make choices so they may maneuver closer to it. Thus, Taulke-Johnson points us towards the importance of focusing on processes seeking to transform imagined utopias into concrete realities. Drawing on Bennet, these anxieties are productive in pushing them towards a form of a ‘great hereafter’ that might best be understood as their evolving understandings of self (Bennet, 2010, pg. 456).

Sally Munt points us to the necessity of proceeding with a degree of caution, as the situation is often complex. Indeed, the danger of only taking on Bennet's or Muñoz's viewpoint is that it might draw us towards romanticising the subaltern position in a way that reproduces colonial archetypes and defends global power structures. Munt's awareness of this danger is relevant in a chapter that is analysing the narratives of longing expressed in interviews with Arab MSM and leads me to asserting that it is the subjectivity of Arab MSM that allows me to be understand their specific anxieties as productive.

In this chapter I turn the narratives of one of my interviewees to examine the underlying anxieties he reveals are underpinning Arab MSM's becoming. I draw on the work of Bennet, Muñoz, and Munt for two main reasons; firstly, to provide examine the interplay of the processes of queerness with those of shame, anxiety and utopianism in Arab MSM conceptions. Secondly, to contend with the how the totality of these forces must be taken into account if we are to contemplate on how my subjects contribute "to the labour of making a queerworld" (Muñoz, 2009, pg. Pg. 25). Ultimately, I seek to reflect on the potentials being opened up by Arab MSM through their processes of imagining a queerer world, and how their imaginings are transforming their realities.

Useful Anxiety

“The discursive logic of queer pride is the sustained defeat of shame... Western queer pride ... tends to privilege victory or the defeat of suffering and social humiliation.” Dina Georgis, (2013, pg. 240 -241)

Eyad is a 24-year-old gay identifying Emirati man who emigrated to the West for university. My conversations with him took place when I was preparing to draw the interview portion of my research to a close. My contact information and the relevant details of my research were passed to him by a friend whom I had interviewed earlier. During our interview, I noted his reflective tone when discussing his experiences prior to migrating to a Western country. Regarding his life as an Arab gay man living in the West, I also note that Eyad comes from a wealthy family. Therefore, his social and economic privileges underpin both the past and the current experiences he detailed. This context frames an experience he considers formative to his current understanding of his identity:

“When I was 14, I went to my American friend’s house for dinner with his family. I’d known them for a while, and they liked me. I remember during dinner they made a point of asking me if there was any ‘girls or *boys*’ that I liked at school. [...] I’d never been asked that before. It made me start worrying about if I was [being seen as] gay by anyone else. It scared the hell out of me... I really like thinking of that now, it’s funny... I like how they really tried to make me know they didn’t care, I have a plan to do that to some baby Arab gay someday.”

This specific environment helped provide a setting in which his social anxieties were seemingly exposed to himself. It would serve us here to define my use of the term ‘anxiety’. In her reading of Jacqueline Rose’s response to Edward Said’s constructions of identity, Dina Georgis writes:

“To be part of any group, Rose argues, all hatred is pushed to the outside other, and what binds people together is a commitment to a strict idea and a strict identification with members of the group. Indeed, social anxiety and hate is predicated on the fear of losing love. We love and need to be loved back when we have most to fear.” (Georgis, 2013, pg. 36)

Therefore, in this conception of anxiety it is located around fears of loss. I extend this conception of anxiety to refer loss as it relates to shame and belonging. In other words, when I speak of ‘anxiety’ I am denoting a fear of difference in relation to the collective my subjects are operating within.

Thus, and to return to Eyad, his anxiety was sparked by a question that explicitly suggested his possible difference. When asked to elaborate on this response to the question posed, Eyad states:

“E: I was scared. I didn’t know what to really say so I just laughed and said ‘no one’.

Q: You said you’d never been asked that question before?

E: No. I don’t know if anyone in my family would even have thought about thinking if I was gay. They just needle you about one day getting married and having kids like they were trying to guide you towards it.”

For Eyad, this exchange was an experience formative to his understanding of himself as a gay man. His musings on one day repeating the question to another Arab gay man are also significant when placed alongside broader discussions of queer utopianism:

“I really like thinking of that now, it’s funny... I like how they really tried to make me know they didn’t care; ... I have a plan to do that to some baby Arab gay someday.”

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the way in which Eyad has seemingly reworked the child Edelman conceives of as the ‘absolute value of reproductive futurism’ (Edelman, 2004, pg. 3). In Eyad’s framing, this child is queered thereby allowing for imaginings of a potential Arab queer future for both. I propose that we see through Eyad anxiety being remade into a productive force. Through this process, he puts into practice Muñoz’ (2009) conception of queerness as a practice that sets up an ideal to follow. Accordingly, from anxiety is spawned a potential that allows for even reproductive futurism to be queered beyond the confines of the heteronormative.

Muñoz’ conception of queerness as a constant meaning-making process that remains out of reach highlights the labour my subjects’ are engaging in when striving for a subjective conception of a queerworld. Eyad is an example of how anxiety borne out of, and perpetuating, shame is being made useful in the everyday configurations of Arab MSM.

The Potentials of Shame

Eyad's navigation of his past anxiety draws me towards thinking about how the separation of shame into productive and non-productive forces is playing out in the current imaginings of Arab MSM. In particular, I find myself contemplating how migration is factoring into this division. Therefore, I turn to Dina Georgis' and her writing about the narratives of coming out and the cultures of post-Stonewall Pride:

“Naturalized as the way to be and become queer, coming out proudly is therefore not simply an event in one's life but also informs what it means to be with oneself. As the queer community's lifeline, pride has not made room for shame because feeling shame carries the weight of feeling backward and being regressive. Indeed, pride is the antidote to a life of shame” (2013, pg. 240)

Georgis' perspective suggests the potential of adopting the idea of Arab dual imaginings. In her framing of pride, she allows space for us to think of shame as working in concert with another - as a force compelling the need of the other to push it out. Though she also makes a concerted effort to highlight the importance of not generalising the anxiety spurred on as shaping all Arab MSM, she asserts that it is an important organising principle of their everyday life:

“At the same time, it is probably not a generalization to say that the fear of social retribution and ostracization in a culture that intensely values family ties and religious/sectarian loyalty is the emotional reality for most Arabs” (ibid.)

Eyad's confrontation with the shame in that formative interaction fed into his process of becoming and can therefore be related to his desire to one day pass that same experience to another Arab MSM.

Indeed, once our conversation turned to his current life as an Arab MSM immigrant the productivity of shame continues to be highlighted. His decision to migrate is associated with a desire to escape cultures of shame, thereby fulfilling the promise of his spawned imaginings:

“I loved my friends and liked what we had [but] ...I planned my whole life around getting out of the UAE...”

When asked to elaborate on his present-day life, we see evidenced how migration further separates shame into being both a productive and non-productive force:

“I have a life, I go out, I have gay friends here and it’s good. It’s just not something I talk about now [...] I change the topic when people find out and ask me where I’m from and what it’s like and why if I pray and my parents and all that stuff... I get why they want to know but I don’t really need to think or talk about that stuff or explain how or why I’m an Arab gay guy”

Eyad demarcates a line between the differing forms of shame that he experiences as an Arab MSM in the UAE, and as an Arab MSM in the West. Living in the UAE, shame helped him forge connections, come to new understanding himself and his sexual desires, and to imagining queer futures for himself and others. Now, however, shame seeks to prod the nuances of his identity.

In earlier chapters, I aligned myself with the work of post-colonial theorists who adopted the framework of *Orientalism* (Said, 1978) to cast a critical eye at the work of Western agents. In particular, I detailed their suspicion of Western conceptions casting Arab MSM as either a figure of fetishization or victimisation - and how this ultimately works to service the ideologies of Western imperialism. (See Chapters 2 and 3). These discussions informed my thinking when I proposed that in engaging with the subjectivity of Arab MSM experiences we can see that their appropriations of Western narratives of identities is localised within their own sexual cultures – thereby altering the meaning that can be gleaned in the understandings spawned from Arab MSM negotiations with globalisation (See Chapter 6).

Hence, with my earlier positions in mind, I propose that the shame Eyad experiences when his Arab gay identity is prodded by Western agents is borne out of a sense that he should be occupying a subaltern position due to both his Arab heteropatriarchal heritage and the supposed freedom he is meant to find as an Arab gay man in the West. To put it another one, his shame is a critical response to a confrontation with the West’s globalising gay discourse. While this shame is borne out of a conception of his sexuality that does not take into account his Arabness I note, however, that it is not destabilising his own conception of self. Instead, Eyad’s subsequent manoeuvring around the topic is a response to an imagining that has yet to catch up with his own.

On the other hand, while Eyad’s experiences present us with fascinating example on the ways in which shame can be productive, I would be wary of generalising the experience. It would be prudent for us to recognise that shame can also manifest as a non-productive force in Arab MSM understandings of self. The topic has come up elsewhere in my

interviews with other Arab MSM who also happen to be students living outside of the Middle East. For instance, Sultan is 21-year-old Saudi gay identifying man who told me the following:

“A lot of people I hook up with from online don’t know that I’m Arab. You look at me and you wouldn’t really know so I don’t tell people ... I just give them a fake name and it keeps me from having to have a conversation that would kill my mood.”

Unlike Eyad, Sultan centres Arabness as a source of shame in this situation. Whereas Eyad frames his Arabness as a topic to avoid due to it leading to a pattern of behaviour in which others attempt to reinforce an idea of his subaltern position, Sultan is seemingly comfortable with erasing it when possible. Andil Gosine discussion of the topic of racial passing in *Brown to Blonde at Gay.com: Passing White in Queer Cyberspace* is useful in surmising some of the broader implications of what Sultan is engaging with here. Gosine states the following:

“Passing white [...] may serve a different purpose, not exclusively an exercise in fantasy or anxiety production, but an opportunity to experience the material and cultural privileges afforded to white people. Unlike its reverse ritual, racial crossing from non-white to white may not be primarily motivated by fetishistic conscious or unconscious desire, but by struggles for access to resources for experience of cultural and political agency.” (Gosine, in O’Riordan and Phillips. 2007, pg. 147)

He goes on to add:

“Interactions in the Toronto gay.com chat rooms make clear that the act of passing white is also an attempt to experience another kind of privilege of whiteness: The opportunity to be viewed as active, dynamic and complex agents.” (ibid. pg. 148)

With Gosine’s argument in mind, Sultan’s engagement in passing allows him to escape the complexity his Arabness poses. His presence on the digital space is so that he can enjoy sexual interactions with other MSM in the West without having to engage with the anxieties necessitating his desire to erase difference. His white-passing privilege allows him to disengage from a binary that places Arabness and same-sex desire on opposing sides:

“When I’m on an app I’m just a gay guy looking to hook up. I don’t have any problem about being Arab, I just try to not really think about it as much ... I move on if it looks like it’s going to come up.”

Sultan's perspective is revealing for a myriad of reasons as it includes: the conflation of whiteness with desirability, the erasure of the autonomy of non-white gay men, and – most relevant to this chapter – a conception of a queer present that only makes space for those who are white, or white passing. I would argue that it is this conception of a fixed present that is spurring Sultan's desire to develop this tactic of confronting non-productive shame, while it is Eyad's conception of an open queer Arab future enabling him to transform this shame into a productive force.

Furthermore, I bring in Sultan's perspective to highlight one striking aspect of both of and Eyad's narratives. Both men frame their desires as a source of anxiety when provoked by others emphasising their difference. As Dina Georgis writes:

“In shame, we become witnesses to our entangled lives and the collective narratives that define the strict terms of belonging. We become aware of the fragility of human connection and the power that others have over us. In this way, shame is generative: it activates the imagination for reconstructing the terms of relationality or community, either by reinvesting in them or by finding and creating new ones.” (2013, pg. 240)

While I would also argue that shame is generative, I would also assert that its output as a force is not fixed. To return to our examples, Eyad's experiences and understandings of selfhood as a gay Arab man outside the UAE, and as a gay man within it, are informed by a reaction to the societal shame taught to him. It at times can be harmful, but it can also be productive. For Sultan on the other hand, the interplay of shame and his own privilege offer him a way to operate within existing oppressive structures. His subjectivity has reshaped shame into being non-productive, resulting in an understanding of an Arab MSM identity where Arabness is to be erased and avoided.

Indeed, this desire to evade had an impact on our interview, as the scheduling of our conversation became an issue. When we finally sat down to speak, he explained:

“I wasn't comfortable about talking about being Arab and gay so I put it off.”

Outside of the UAE, Sultan's understanding, or investment, in his selfhood as a gay man is informed by a reaction to structures of shame that reinforces an investment in a problematic binary that codes Arabness and same-sex desire as opposing. Georgis' analysis of a qualitative study by Jared McCormick sheds some light on this. McCormick writes:

“[homosexual life is kept tightly private because of] economic considerations and the security the family continues to provide” (2006, pg. 240)

For Georgis, Arab subjectivities are in a state of process. Arab MSM identities are informed by experiences of suffering, conflicted desires, responsibilities and geopolitical realities. Shame becomes an integral part to how these subjectivities are feeding into ‘becoming’ and “the challenging conditions through which their subjectivities are emerging and taking shape.” (Georgis, 2013, pg. 249) Eyad and Sultan both navigate the concept of cultural shame in their lives in different ways, leading to very different understandings of how their Arabness and sexuality are able to converge.

While I have thus far argued that shame as a force is an aspect that is key in the process of Arab MSM’s utopian becoming, I am also cognisant of how ideas of hope, joy and pride factor into the process.

Joy and Nostalgia

Eyad's desire to recreate what he considers to be a significant moment with another Arab MSM was not the first instance in which he alluded to his imaginings as they applied to collective potentials. His shared experiences with other Arab MSM was a topic that he frequently broached in our conversation:

"I know a lot of gay men [in the UAE], we were like a group... we hung around and talked about how important things needed to happen... We'd call it a 'weekly pride parade' ... We'd talk about what we felt, what we wanted, we'd talk about sex, some of us would have sex. It was nice having that"

When asked to describe this group of men, he emphasised their similarities, especially in regard to their shared sexual, education, age and socioeconomic status. Additionally, he spoke of their shared concerns and desires, indicating that these exchanges helped them in feeling secure in their identities.

"I don't know what I would've done if I didn't have that. I'm glad I did."

For Eyad, finding points of convergence with other Arab MSM has been an important aspect of his imaginings of future potentials.

"I think that having other gay Arabs in my life is important... I know I want to end up with another Arab man one day."

I argue that this demonstrates that Eyad ties his understanding of his desires and his imagining of his future to the identity that he carved out before immigrating

"We did things like ... go to each other's houses during birthdays and Eid. We'd plan trips together; we'd send each other links to shows that had gay people ... you could call anyone anytime if you were feeling bad and just wanted to vent."

It is hard to ignore the tone of nostalgia underpinning Eyad's retelling of what can thought of as his queer past. When speaking of nostalgia here I am thinking of it in relation to Susan Stewart's staging of the ideological foundations of nostalgia when writing:

"The past it seeks has never existed except as a narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face." (1984, pg. 23)

This nostalgia runs counter to the overwhelming shame of postcolonial clichés that Sally Munt is wary of in her discussion of queer futures and utopian reproductions (Munt, 2019). While shame is a relevant force here, so is joy. Eyad seizes anachronisms within his queer past and incorporates them into how he sees himself today, and what he imagines for himself in the future.

At the start of my analysis in this chapter I quoted Dina Georgis' discussion of the discursive logic of queer pride as being the 'sustained defeat of shame' (2013, pg. 240). I then moved on to extend her understanding of Jacqueline Rose's conception of anxiety to define it as being localised around the shame of not belonging. I proposed that shame stands at the root of Arab MSM anxiety, and then went on to argue for the potentials of shame as both a productive and a non-productive force. I summate these readings here to delineate my conception of shame as working in concert with joy. I contend that Arab MSM conceptions of futurity rely on both to achieve imaginings of their subjective potentials.

These narratives of a distinctly joyous Arab and queer past are not exclusive to my conversation with Eyad, it featured prominently in my interviews with other Arab MSM. For instance, Kazem is a 31-year-old man from Kuwait and during our interview he talked to me about bringing his former partner to his family home:

"The whole family meets at my grandmother's home during the weekend for lunch. We end up staying until late at night talking, drinking tea and playing card games. When [we] got serious, I really wanted to bring him along... I knew my cousins would like him and we weren't obvious about anything so I wasn't worried about what anyone would say... I was nervous, but it felt good to have him there along with everyone else and seeing him joking with my mother. I liked that we had a place with each other aside from just each other."

Though they admittedly occupy a place in each other's daily lives with discretion and secrecy, Kazem relates themes of productive shame, utopian nostalgia and joy when this example. Different aspects of identity interact with different systems of oppression in daily life to open up a space for the individual to simply exist. Kazem found a way to incorporate his partner within his daily life and in doing seeks out the potentials he imagined for himself while operating within his cultural system. Like Eyad, it is the process of dual imaginings that is deeply tied to both his navigations of his daily life, and his understandings of self.

Conclusion

“High school ends and the bullying stops: you’ll move to an urban gay enclave, meet the man of your dreams, and have a wonderful, sparkly, magical life.”
(Tseng, 2010)

In ‘Thinking Past Pride: Queer Arab Shame in Bareed Mista3jil’ Georgis conducts an analysis of a book produced by Meem, a Lebanese organisation comprised of lesbian, bisexual, and queer women and transgender persons. She uses it to consider how shame can be applied to the question of what it means to generally be Arab and same-sex desiring. What emerges out of her work is a vital rumination on the potentials of shame within queer hope and futurity.

Her views on the standing of shame in the ‘becoming’ of Arab queers greatly informed my own readings of utopian imaginings as they relate to the everyday identity configuration of my subjects. However, upon introducing the issues sparked by queer mobility we are quickly reminded of the importance of acknowledging the nuances of subjectivity. The fact that the central focus of this chapter is a gay identifying student who immigrated out of the UAE is significant, especially when he directly links this movement to his sexual becoming:

“I planned my whole life around getting out of the UAE...”

In the introduction to this chapter, I drew on Richard Taulke-Johnson’s work on the queer migration of university students, in which he argued that such mobility was:

“a means by which they ‘remapp[ed] their worlds and their places in it’ (Knopp 2004, 123), and one of the ways in which their selection processes were queered.”
(Taulke-Johnson, 2010, pg. 252).

And indeed, we see in Eyad’s movement an engagement with a process that seeks to remap his world and his place in it. Jason Tseng points us to the sinister implications underpinning this act when writing:

“What I question is this seeming meta-narrative that many in the gay mainstream are pushing: Get out of high school; flee your bigoted [sic] small town and move to an urban gay enclave; join the gay community as a card carrying [sic] member of the League of Fashionable Culture Generators; Enlightened, Accepting Queers

versus Ignorant, Biggoted [sic] Straights; Urban versus Rural; Us versus Them.” (Tseng, 2010)

In certain ways, we could argue Eyad parrots the meta-narrative that Tseng so strongly rejects. The utopia being imagined is one that risks the idealisation of a Western normalcy. In this interpretation, his drive to leave is fuelled by a cultural shame and an imagined somewhere where his desires are irrelevant. However, Eyad is plainly aware of his inability to fulfil this meta-narrative. The different facets of his converging identities complicate his experiences as a same-sex desiring person - allowing instead for his Arabness to inform his queerness, and for his queerness to inform his Arabness (and so on). Instead what we see is a fulfilment of what Tseng’s envisions in response to the failure of the ‘gay promise’:

“The gay promise failed me. I went from being ostracized by my straight classmates in high school to being ostracized by many white gay men in an urban gay enclave

...

It has become clear to me that the gay promise which Dan Savage espouses only applies to some people. And that if it doesn't apply to you, you have to make your own space.” (Tseng, 2010)

Here I return to Sally Munt and her cautioning of the successes of gay liberation. I remind us of her description of the synthesized Frankenstein’s monster/domesticated homosexual:

“This person is keen to capitalize on their fragile inclusion in the national imaginary and sees himself as a person with rights to protect, and an individual selfhood to enhance.” (Munt, 2019, pg. 235)

For Munt, the meta-narrative being discussed includes the mechanisms of homonationalism and homonormativity amongst its core attributes. Thus, the selfhood being enhanced is based on postcolonial clichés. Meaning that the purpose of the Frankenstein’s monster created by the national imagery (be they the proud homosexual of the West, or the shamed homosexual of the East) is to uplift the Western nation.

While Munt makes an effort to emphasise the importance of taking on a postcolonial perspective when discussing the topic of queer hope and action, I argue that her framing

erases the positionality and experiences recontextualising these clichéd narratives. For instance, she rightfully identifies the figure of the ‘shameful’ homophobia of the East, and thus the shamed homosexual, as a postcolonial cliché. (Munt, 2019, pg. 235) In doing so, however, she does not touch on the significance of navigating the concepts of cultural and personal ‘shame’ to the becoming of non-western same-sex desiring persons.

It is important for us to recognise how shame can be productive. As evidenced by this overview of longing, shame and utopianism as they occurred in my interviewees’ narratives, placing a red line under this Frankenstein figure signifies an investment in negativity that might in itself border on the colonial. To do so would erase my subjects’ own autonomy, and how their specific perspectives are shaping their understandings of self.

Alongside the concerns that Munt highlights in her work, issues of privilege, shame, hope, pride and ambition also need to be woven into our discussions of utopianism. However, we must also suture an understanding of the fact that these issues are not static within their definition, nor are utopian imaginings of potentials exclusive to Western queer communities. What queer utopias means to Eyad is different to what it might mean for a white Western scholar. Indeed, it is just as different to the imaginings of Kazem or Sultan.

Conclusion

“I wish you could see what I see” – Salim (Gaiman, 2001)

Early in this thesis I wrote at length about Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) (see chapter 1). I considered how his contributions to the field of postcolonial study moved scholarship towards deeper reflections about the imperialistic actions of Western powers and its imaginings of the Orient, and those in it, as the ‘something else’. (Said, 1978, pg. 67). In his later writing, Said contends with the Iraq war and demonstrates why his framework remains relevant for the analysis of ‘new Orientalisms’ governing Western thought and action in the Middle East today (Said, 2005, pg. 20). I began, and now end, this thesis with a reflection on Edward Said’s interventions within the fields of postcolonial theory because he remains a figure crucial to the continuing development of critical and cultural discussions of Arab people.

As I developed my thinking of Said’s oeuvre, I turned to reflecting on the work of those whose writing builds on Said’s framework. However, as I asserted in my literature review, one result of the framework spearheaded by Said has been the localisation of our reflections around the topic of ‘the West’ (ibid). Consequently, throughout this thesis I endeavoured to show how as a result the othered Arab parties have been side-lined and made to discursively function as the analytical barometer with which the continuing influences of colonial practices is measured. As I turn my focus to concluding this thesis, I assert that in discussions of Arab identity, sexuality and desire a gap has formed in academic theorising that risks orientalising our subject. I posit that within studies of Arab lives, our thinking has too often relied on comparative patterns that do not factor in our subjects’ perspectives, and as a result has limited the scope of our theorising. What this thesis has done is respond to this gap by bringing these theories to the field and building on them through the centring of the underexamined dimensions of Arab MSM’s lives.

One of the core questions I laid out in the introduction of this thesis is: *How do academic discussions about Arab MSM identities relate to the lived experiences of Arab MSM today?* In answering that question now, this thesis has highlighted the awkwardness of our conceptions once they are related to our subjects’ current negotiations of their day-to-day life. On a discursive level, I would argue that similar questions need to remain an active element of our framework so that we may evolve discussions of othered cultures. Indeed, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Massad (2005) and Haritaworn’s (2008) reworking of *Orientalism*’s framework centres the globalising West in their discussions

of the ‘Gay International’. They align the self-understandings of these men with a colonial overwriting of local Arab sexual cultures. However, this thesis has evidenced that the agency of our subjects - and their understandings of their practices – needs to be factored into our theorising.

For instance, a key finding of this thesis has exhibited the emergence of a subset of Arab MSM for whom their foundational understanding of their Arab desiring identities is deeply linked with their mediations with globalism. This is made apparent when faced with the language and narratives underpinning the words of under-25 Arab MSM identifying as gay. Indeed, this emergent community trait is most overt in the words of those aligning their public online performances of ‘Arabness’ and ‘gayness’ with a greater project seeking to reconcile questions of Arab belonging. (See chapters 6). I argue for the need to make space in our conceptions of Arab MSM identities to recognise how local sexual cultures interact with globalised ideology and ultimately factor into the development of nuanced and specific self-understandings.

We see in them the attempt to open up local and global conceptions of Arabness, through the blending of global same-sex desiring conceptions with local understandings of ethnicity and sexuality. While the ultimate result of these practices is up in the air, my examination of these men’s online practices has displayed a community that is mediating with global structures in their routine engagement acts of reclamations. These evolving self-understandings have enabled the convergence of identities that are, and continue to be, discursively separated within local and global cultural conceptions.

Indeed, a thorough analysis of their online interactions showcases their contributions to the reshaping of collective self-understandings of current Arab same-sex desiring communities. Their interactions with global structures manifests in specific practices such as: their engagement with politics of respectability and responsibility in their insulated dialogues with one another in Arab MSM online spaces, and their performances of the Arabness of their same-sex desiring identities in online spaces that facilitate their interactions. I maintain that their input on the contours of their Arab MSM community is vastly different from those whose mediations with global structures could lead us to more fittingly describe them as agents of the Gay International (See chapter 5).

In truth, I find myself (broadly) aligning with these men in their rebuffing what I have come to identify as a discursive impulse that has unwittingly painted Arab MSM sexual cultures as static. Instead, I have come to an understanding of Arab MSM communities

today as being varied, complex and, perhaps most importantly, distinct. Thus, one of the broader goals of this thesis has been to shift from the work done to define these men to ask how these Arab MSM are defining each other. In centring this question, I was able to contend with the moment and community they are existing in.

To that end, I began this work of by taking into account the media and legal landscape that has shaped my subjects' understandings of their same-sex desires. I explored the scholarship of Arab writers who have contextualised our modern understandings of desire in relation to documented histories of Arab MSM. Through this interrogation, I questioned the practicality of readings seeking to combat problematic narratives of Arab homophobia by casting distant histories as a primary force in the shaping the manifestations of Arab desire (Taïa, 2012; Khalaf & Gagnon, 2006; Farooqi, 2012; Dalacoura, 2014; Ahmed, 2016).

Rather, this spurred me on to thinking of how desires were being communicated in my interviews, where performances of gender emerge as an important factor in the interactions of Arab MSM in geolocative media (See Chapter 3). I detailed Arab MSM investment in notions of Arab masculinity in the language and imagery of their profile, which ran parallel to users who emphasised distinct stereotypes of Arab femininities in flirtatious declarations, to argue that the hyper-gendered discourse of Arab MSM cultures is being reproduced in these profiles. Through this I found that a fascination with youthful effeminacy and the ultimate valorisation of an Arab masculinity emerges as a crucial factor in the sexual and power dynamics governing Arab MSM cultures. I also assert that these hyper-gendered interactions are primarily informed by the sexual cultures of the region - manifesting in ways vastly different to conceptions of masculinity in Western MSM online communities (Al-Malki, et. al, 2012; Naber, 2012; Wynn, 2006).

My interviewees also lead me to contemplate the role of the nation, a topic I went on to address in more detail when I wrestled with the topic of religion as it has been related to Arab MSM lives. This topic has received a great deal of focus in discussions about Arab identity (see, for instance, Haddad, 2011). However, one glaring omission, that became clear to me upon engaging with my interview transcripts, was the lack of engagement with religion as it relates Arab MSM's everyday experiences and self-conceptions. Thus, a key finding that soon emerged was the mundane ways in which religion is operating in the lives of Arab MSM. (See chapter 4)

For many, renewing their devotion to religion led them to reconciling aspects of their sexual, religious and ethnic identities they initially understood as existing in binary. Through online media, they have accessed resources enabling them to confront narratives limiting those possibilities. On the other hand, for others it served as a source of anxiety that impacts how they practiced, performed and inhabited their sexual identity. As an example, I demonstrated how this manifested in them avoiding the topic of religion all together or disengaging from anything to do with their sexuality during religious events. Most importantly, however, was how a relationship with religion has been coded into their everyday mediations with their identities. I contend that when discussing the lives of Arab MSM, we need to move away from considering religion as an overwhelming force in the shaping Arab MSM self-understandings. Instead, I argue for us to come to an understanding of how their mediations with it are enabling them to align it comfortably with their desiring selves in the everyday.

To summate, I started this conclusion with a line that is borrowed from a vignette I described in the introduction of this work. Over the course of the 4 years that have culminated in this thesis, I often found myself writing to respond to that request and all of its implications. Through this thesis, I have sought to explore how Arab MSM are seeing the world around them, and how that world is seeing them. There is rich interiority of the lives of Arab men who have sex with men in the Arab region that has for too long been left unexplored. I conclude this work by claiming that the lives and understandings of Arab MSM are complex, specific and continually evolving past the reductive conceptions they have been afforded. The analytical ‘third way’ this thesis seeks to typify afforded me new avenues into exploring the subjectivity and lived experiences of my participants and expand upon existing theory. I assert that the path towards evolving past the critical impasse we are in is by doing away with the limitations imposed on studies of Arab same-sex desiring persons, and Arab cultures at large, and in committing to the re-centring of subjects and their perspectives.

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