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To cite this article: Sabiha Allouche (2020) Different Normativity and Strategic 'Nomadic' Marriages: Area Studies and Queer Theory, Middle East Critique, 29:1, 9-27, DOI: [10.1080/19436149.2020.1704504](https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1704504)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2020.1704504>



Published online: 13 Jan 2020.



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Different Normativity and Strategic ‘Nomadic’ Marriages: Area Studies and Queer Theory

SABIHA ALLOUCHE

University of Exeter, Penryn, UK

ABSTRACT: *This article embraces Maya Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar’s recent recommendation ‘for a politics in queer theory that works to displace the United States as the prehensive force for everyone else’s future’ in order to ponder the scope and reach of queer theory through/as area studies (Middle East).¹ The article draws upon personal experiences and narratives of homo-desiring men and women in/from Lebanon who perform hetero married life while pursuing same-sex desire elsewhere, in order to conceive ‘different normativity’ and ‘nomadic unions.’ The article posits ‘strategic nomadic marriages’ as a fluctuating and unsteady type of union that accommodates the particularity of the ‘sex/gender systems’ of global south societies.*

KEY WORDS: *Different normativity; Hetero-patriarchy; Lebanon; Queer analysis; Sectarianism; Strategic marriage*

I believe that it is the theory, rather than the queer element itself, that often is hegemonized in queer scholarship, and this is precisely how I frame my work hereafter. Since 2012, I have come to know an increasing number of self-identified homo-desiring men and women in and/or from Lebanon who opt to perform hetero married life in order to escape kin pressure while pursuing same-sex desire elsewhere. I term such practices ‘strategic nomadic marriages’ (SNMs). My insistence on qualifying these marriages as nomadic rather than queer will be explicated through my analysis.

My focus on SNMs is not meant to act as scholarly evidence of what popular culture has presumed and portrayed all along.² Nor am I building a case for SNMs, which easily can be discredited as fake or hypocritical.³ Conversely, I caution against such views for the mere fact that they presuppose a universal system of moral values

Correspondence Address: Sabiha Allouche, Lecturer in Middle East Politics, Department of Politics, University of Exeter, Penryn, UK. Email: S.Allouche@exeter.ac.uk

¹ Maya Mikdashi & J. Puar (2016) Queer Theory and Permanent War, in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Queer Studies*, 22(2), pp. 215–216.

² See, for example, Arab-Australian web series *I LuV U But...* by Foufu Films (2012); the novel *Guapa* by Saleem Haddad (2016); and *Bareed Mist3jil* by the Meem Collective (2009).

³ Such accusations prevail in the context of ‘cooperative marriages’ in China between self-identified homo-desiring men and/or women; see, for example, Stephanie Yingyi Wang (2019) When Tongzhi Marry: Experiments of Cooperative Marriage between Lolas and Gay Men in Urban China, *Feminist Studies* 45(1), pp. 13–35.

against which local and indigenous praxes are measured. Last but not least, I do not necessarily situate SNMs in relation to the notion of resistance, which I believe is an out dated and well-documented paradigm.⁴ Such strategic unions unequivocally are celebrated in liberal ‘Gay Internationalists’⁵ circles, and viewed as a smart effort that circumvents the hostility of Lebanon’s legal system toward same-sex desire. In the same vein, such strategic unions facilitate the “coming out” – arguably the quintessential western liberal rhetoric – of those individuals who financially are privileged enough to embrace their orientation despite the risk of losing considerable familial and social ties. It is important, nevertheless, that we remind ourselves that the celebratory stance that ensues from SNMs is in sharp contrast to their hetero-patriarchal bedrocks, as I show in my analysis hereafter. If anything, it is important that we recognize the inevitable ambivalence they assume given that they coincide with critical feminists’ views on the institution of marriage as unequally gendered,⁶ homonormative⁷ and largely exclusionary for those who find themselves operating on the margins.⁸ In any case, the peculiarity of my interlocutors’ agency escapes and exceeds heteronormativity as we know it. The ‘different normativity’⁹ that informs their day-to-day living and through which I largely frame my analysis coincides with what Lisa Rofel terms ‘desiring selves’;¹⁰ that is, neoliberal subjects that emerge from newly-found desires with respect to consumption, work and sex. In addition, my interlocutors’ narratives convey ‘a neither here nor there’ logic that recalls the hybridised,¹¹ manifold,¹² and flexible¹³ rubrics under which their multiple subjectivities¹⁴ operate. Furthermore, and in addition to displaying pragmatic and adaptive selves, they are markedly ‘reluctant’¹⁵ as far as queer activism is concerned.

⁴ Such interrogations have been examined in length, for example, by Susan B. Boyd (2013) *Marriage is More Than Just a Piece of Paper: Feminist Critiques of Same-Sex Marriage*, *The Peter A. Allard School of Law*.

⁵ Following Joseph Massad (2013) *Gay Internationalists*, of which he recounts *Helem* in Lebanon and *Al-Qaws* in Occupied Palestine, are symptomatic of the internationalization of Eurocentric identitarian politics that forces bodies into an either/or homo/hetero binary.

⁶ See, for example, Sara-Jane Finlay & Victoria Clarke (2003) ‘A Marriage of Inconvenience?’ *Feminist Perspectives on Marriage*, *Feminism & Psychology* 13 (4), pp. 415–420.

⁷ Eliza Garwood (2016) *Reproducing the Homonormative Family: Neoliberalism, Queer Theory and Same-sex Reproductive Law*, *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17(2), pp. 5–17.

⁸ Karma Chávez (2013) *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press).

⁹ Yau Ching first coined the expression ‘different normativity’ to describe alternative lifestyles that are lived ‘as normal as possible’ in the context of China; see Yau Ching (2010) *Dreaming of Normal While Sleeping with Impossible*, Introduction, in: Y. Ching (ed) *As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong*, pp. 1–14 (Aberdeen: Hong Kong University Press).

¹⁰ Lisa Rofel (2007) *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality and Public Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press).

¹¹ Timothy Brennan (2008) *Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory*, in Revathi Krishnaswamy & John C. Hawley (eds), *The Post-colonial and the Global*, pp. 37–53 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

¹² Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute).

¹³ Aihwa Ong (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

¹⁴ Henrietta Moore (1994) *The Problem of Explaining Violence in the Social Sciences*, in: Penelope Harvey, Peter Gow & Clive Hollin (eds) *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*, pp. 138–156 (London: Routledge).

¹⁵ Sabiha Allouche (2019a) *The Reluctant Queer*, in Kohl: *A Journal of Body and Gender Research* 5(1), pp. 11–22.

In order to introduce the topic of SNMs in the specific context of Lebanon, a number of steps is in order. Empirically, it is important that we contextualize married life in Lebanon. This is evident in the recollected narratives that shape my analysis. ‘Connective patriarchy,’¹⁶ traditional gendered expectations, ‘desiring selves’¹⁷ and transnational modes of being all interfere in the making of my interlocutors’ ‘different normativity.’ Equally important at the empirical level is not to conflate SNMs with MSMs (men who have sex with men), an expected orientalist assumption that I relate in detail in due time.¹⁸

Theoretically, I stress the merits of thinking queer theory through the area of the Middle East. What emerges is a re-fashioning of gendered dynamics vis-à-vis the household – a point that helps us rethink the limits of same-sex marriage legislations and from which Gay Internationalists could learn.¹⁹ By re-focusing the politics of the household through a ‘queer theory as area studies’ lens, I hope to capture a locally-informed ‘different normativity’ that remains sheltered from and immune to western queer scholarship’s insistence on politicizing the queer *elsewhere*, without accounting for the ‘segregation between the location of theory and the site of the theorised.’²⁰

A nomadic state, or the ever-becoming character of space and time,²¹ alongside a different normativity analysis capture the linguistic and theoretical voids that arise from a forceful queering exercise. The queer for too long has been re -fashioned, -nuanced, -configured, -transformed and -tailored in order to fit, irrespective of their context and the history(ies) involved. This is particularly evident in the high rejection rates of Muslim and Middle East based LGBT individuals’ asylum applications.²² I hope in this work to engage queerness from the standpoint of a least imposed episteme. My interlocutors’ sexuality is ‘different’ indeed. At the same time, it persists along an everyday that, albeit seemingly conformist, abounds with messiness, contradictions and unruliness. If anything, I hope to un-burden my interlocutors’ sexuality from the confusion that western queer scholarship imposes upon them.

To write wilfully²³ from and about queerness from a non-western standpoint is to question western academics’ insistence on ‘queering stuff,’ be it the ‘Middle Eastern gay,’ if such a category exists, or entire disciplines. I argue that the mere theorisation of the queer, i.e., its scientification, does not justify scholars’ race to queer the ‘rest’ of the world. This state of affairs succinctly is captured by Maya

¹⁶ Suad Joseph (1999) *Intimate Servicing in Arab Families: Gender, Self, and Identity* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press).

¹⁷ Lisa Rofel, ‘Desiring China.’

¹⁸ This work originally was destined for an edited book on the topic of heteronormativity. One of the editors’ utter ignorance about the ramifications of queer theory in the context of the Middle East led me to withdraw from that project and to share my work in a more apt space.

¹⁹ For a critique of the legal, political and socio-economic limits of same-sex marriage, see Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*.

²⁰ Jonathan Daniel Luther (2017) Queer Theory, in *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 25 (1), p. 233.

²¹ Rosi Braidotti (1994) *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press).

²² See, for example, Sabiha Allouche (2017) Dis-Intersecting Intersectionality: The Time of Queer Syrian Refugee-ness in Lebanon, in Kohl: *A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, 3(1), pp. 59–77.

²³ Sara Ahmed (2014) *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 3.

Mikdashi and Jasbir Puar, who rightly remark how ‘the “local” in the global south [is] unwittingly reified as raw data.’²⁴ Ultimately, my article is an attempt to engage Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel’s interrogation, ‘what does area bring to queer studies?’²⁵

Notes on Data Collection

This article is informed by in-depth and semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of five years with fifteen couples in and from Lebanon who have opted for strategic nomadic marriages. I initially and unexpectedly had come across three such couples in 2012, when I was conducting research for a project with a distinct aim (ethnographic exploration of cis-heterosexual romantic love). I was sufficiently intrigued by the paradigms that ensue from SNMs to instigate an analysis proper.

The main difficulty resided in reaching further couples. Two main routes informed my quest. I included a researcher’s profile on the male homo-erotic ‘dating app’ Grindr where I clearly described my goals.²⁶ This approach led to dozens of inquisitive replies – to my delight – but resulted in only one instance of SNMs. The self-identified gay and lesbian interlocutors whom I had interviewed for my 2012 project referred to me the majority of the SNM couples who feature in this work. They rightly emphasized to their networks the scholarly nature of my investigation, as opposed to sensationalist reporting work. Undoubtedly then, my occupation as a Lebanese researcher in gender and sexuality studies who is based in London contributed toward my interlocutors’ willingness to relate their experience to me. Nevertheless, it took me and my interlocutors no less than five years to identify ten additional SNM couples. This work, then, is an on-going one.

Among the fifteen couples informing this work, at least one of the partners had a dual nationality. Australia, the US, the UK and Morocco are some of the contexts that partly inform my interlocutors’ sexual politics and decision-making. Interestingly, for those residing abroad, SNMs allow them to strengthen their links with their homeland, i.e., Lebanon. At the same time, SNMs, for my strictly Lebanese interlocutors is a ‘welcomed’ venue for migrating and initiating the process of acquiring a foreign passport. Either way, the quest for a partner privileged Lebanese-ness as a quintessential criterion, since, as Majdi asserts, ‘only a Lebanese can navigate this mess.’²⁷ Here, it would be futile to think borders and migration in conventional terms. Instead, place and time acquire an ever-becoming character, in line with Braidotti’s conceptualization of the ‘nomadic subject.’ Braidotti states: ‘Consciousness-raising and the subversion of set conventions define the nomadic state, not the literal act of travelling.’²⁸ That is, ‘the nomad is a traveller in the field of intensities’, and ‘this type of travel may or

²⁴ Maya Mikdashi & Jasbir Puar (2016) Queer Theory and Permanent War, in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Queer Studies*, 22(2), p. 215.

²⁵ Anjali Arondekar & Geeta Patel (2015) Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction, in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 22(2), p. 156.

²⁶ The Lebanese Telecommunications Ministry in 2019 ordered Internet data services providers to block access to Grindr; whereas many providers did oblige, some still allow access to it. See *Middle East Eye* (2019), November.

²⁷ Author Skype Interview, Majdi, July 2017. Majdi is a pseudo-name. In this work, I do not use my interlocutors’ real names. The pseudo-names do not necessarily reflect their sect or place of origin.

²⁸ Braidotti, ‘Nomadic Subjects,’ p. 5.

may not involve physical displacement.²⁹ The (im)possibility of locating my subjects in a concrete geographical, emotional and sociological set becomes apparent in the uncertainty that defines their overall epistemes. Indifference, fatigue, what-ifs and what-about-isms are some of the recurring affects that emerged from the interviews I conducted over the past few years. Most importantly, and irrespective of their homo-desire, none actively took part in what could be termed queer activism. It is precisely for this reason that I opted for Braidotti's nomadic concept, as opposed to queer to describe the strategic alliances I relate. Not only does my analysis capture the limits of an applied queer analysis, whereby queer theory is taken as given, it also rightly shows the theoretical prospects of thinking queer theory through the area of the Middle East.

Theory aside, and where gender is concerned, traditional roles did not hold in relation to the role of the male bread winner in the context of SNMs. Contrariwise, getting pregnant did, and continues to constitute a major point of contestation for my interlocutors. Here, it is my female interlocutors who find their bodies policed, oftentimes contrary to initial agreement of not getting pregnant. Such body politics eclipse queerness as identity while reiterating same-sex as practice. In other words, they reveal the susceptibility of alternative intimacies to heterosexist attitudes, since they demean my female interlocutors' homo-erotic desire.

I only could interview the couples in person during limited and scattered visits to Lebanon, mostly over Christmas, Easter and summer breaks. For that reason, most of the interviews were conducted via Skype and Facebook Messenger instead. Depending on the logistics, I managed to interview my couples jointly, separately or both. Sometimes, they would invite close friends and kin to join our conversations, which resulted in an even more nuanced examination. Last but not least, out of the fifteen couples I have interviewed, two recently have finalized their divorce, one recently has given birth to a baby daughter, and one currently is considering artificial insemination toward becoming pregnant. These remarks are particularly meaningful, given the importance of bearing children following conventional societal constructions of marriage in Lebanon. Consequently, desire - be it normative or not - does not constitute the sole or main element of my analysis of SNMs. Rather, my focus is on the contradictions that arise between their homo-desire and conventional household politics of Lebanese society. Crucially, I theorize SNMs through the framework of 'different normativity' in a two-fold exercise aimed at steering away from Euro-American interpretations of queer intimacy, and at recognizing the local material shifts that emerge from globalized subjectivities.³⁰ Such analysis goes beyond an East/West binary while shutting down possible Orientalist interventions vis-à-vis SNMs.

On a last note, scholarly work on gender and sexuality in the Middle East increasingly recognizes the need analytically to engage with the theme of embodiment,

²⁹ Cesare Di Felicianantonio & Kaciano B. Gadelha (2016) Affect, Bodies and Desire: 'Queering' Methods and Methodologies to Research Queer Migration, *Journal of Economic and Social Geography*, 108(3), p. 284.

³⁰ For a cross-cultural examination of the intersection of global political economies with sexuality, see Mark B. Padilla, Jennifer S. Hirsch, Miguel Munoz-Laboy, Robert Sember & Richard G. Parker (eds.) (2008) *Love and Globalization: Transformations of Intimacy in the Contemporary World* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University). For the specific context of Egypt and the materialization of new forms of cis hetero sexualities, see Frances Hasso (2011) *Consuming Desire: Family Crisis and the Sate in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

especially as it relates to men's experiences.³¹ Men's affects and aesthetics often are eclipsed when juxtaposed against the literature on Muslim women, whose experiences, aesthetics, power negotiations and everyday lives have been and continue to be amply documented. Embodied conceptualizations of the body redeploy Middle Eastern lives beyond the assumed rigidity of an Islam that often is misread as anti-fun,³² with pleasure and leisure³³ being increasingly accounted for. My work privileges sexual pleasure in its examination of marriage, and thus contributes to the overall 'embodiment turn.'

Different Normativity and Its Precedents

Strategic marriages among self-identified homo-desiring men and women in Lebanon bring forth further examples of strategic partnerships documented worldwide. In the context of China, for instance, similar strategic marriages among self-identified gay and lesbian individuals, known as *xinghun* or cooperative marriages, recently have been documented.³⁴ Such partnerships have been depicted positively in a number of works: As a 'silent force of resistance';³⁵ a 'contentious strategy';³⁶ or a 'queer kinship practice.'³⁷ Neither *xinghun* nor SNMs denote men who have sex with men and who enter hetero-marriages with suspecting or unsuspecting wives. In the context of China for instance, *tongqi*, or 'getting gayed,' has become the expression to designate 'duped' wives whose husbands actively conceal their sexual identity from them.³⁸

SNMs share the strategic element that we find in marriages between nationals and non-nationals of a particular country in order to secure residency or working rights for the latter. For example, transnational anthropologist Nicole Constable dismantles the many myths surrounding 'mail-order brides' (between US men and Filipina women) and ethnographically shows the inadequate binary notions of 'women's oppression' and 'male domination.'³⁹ Instead, Constable argues against a 'dichotomous view' of love and opportunism where strategic and pragmatic concerns are treated as incompatible with emotional ones.⁴⁰ In a reversed exercise, Parveez Mody and Maya Mikdashi show how couples opting to remove themselves from the social and politico-legal

³¹ Farha Ghannam (2013) *Live and Die like a Man: Gender Dynamics in Urban Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press); and Nefissa Neguib (2015) *Nurturing Masculinities: Men, Food, and Family in Contemporary Egypt* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press).

³² Asef Bayat (2007) Islamism and the Politics of Fun, *Public Culture*, 19(3), pp. 433–459.

³³ Laleh Khalili (2016) The Politics of Pleasure: Promenading on the Corniche and Beachgoing, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 34(4), pp. 583–600; Sertaç Sehlirkoglu (2016) Exercising in Comfort: Islamicate Culture of *Mahremiyet* in Everyday Istanbul, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 12(2), pp. 143–165; and Pascal Menoret (2014) *Joyriding in Riyadh: Oil, Urbanism and Road Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

³⁴ Jingshu Zhu (2018) 'Unqueer' Kinship? Critical Reflections on 'Marriage Fraud' in Mainland China, *Sexualities*, 21(7), pp. 1–17; Min Liu (2013) Two Gay Men Seeking Two Lesbians: An Analysis of Xinghun (Formality Marriage) Ads on China's Tianya.cn, *Sexuality & Culture*, 17(3), pp. 494–511; and Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2013) *Shanghai Lolas: Female Tongzhi Communities and Politics in Urban China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press).

³⁵ Yip Lo Kam, 'Shanghai Lolas,' p. 100.

³⁶ Yingyi Wang, 'When Tongzhi Marry,' p. 23.

³⁷ Elizabeth L. Engebretsen (2013) *Queer Women in Urban China: An Ethnography* (New York, NY and London: Routledge), p. 59.

³⁸ Zhu, 'Unqueer Kinship?'

³⁹ Nicole Constable (2003) *Romance on a Global Stage: Pen Pals, Virtual Ethnography, and "Mail Order" Marriages* (Berkeley, CA: California University Press), p. 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 11.

parameters of marriage in India and Lebanon, respectively, find themselves marginalized in the social, legal, and political sense.⁴¹ Conversely, Mody argues, ‘the processes of transgression and reintegration, typified by love-marriage phenomena, create a unique social space of moral ambivalence through which social orders transform themselves.’⁴² Further examples of strategic intimacies can be found in works examining ‘marriage-scapes,’⁴³ ‘sex-scapes,’⁴⁴ and global and transnational political economies of care work.⁴⁵

In the context of India, critical scholarly works lament the ‘overstated’ status of the love/arranged dichotomy⁴⁶ and the hegemonic depictions of arranged marriage as ‘backward’ and of love marriage as ‘progressive.’⁴⁷ For example, C. J. Fuller and Haripriya Narasimhan excavate ‘personal happiness’⁴⁸ in both love and arranged marriage, thus challenging assumptions about the lack of happiness in the latter. In the same vein, Patricia Uberoi conceives ‘arranged love marriage’ as a ‘style of match-making in which a romantic choice already made is endorsed, *post facto*, by parental approval and treated thereafter like an arranged marriage.’⁴⁹ Last but not least, Shalini Grover emphasizes the importance of accounting for the intersection of class, caste, and geographical location in order to understand arranged marriages and love marriages along a spectrum rather than a binary.⁵⁰ This scholarship recognizes the strategic, emotional and material factors that shape marital unions and embraces their indeterminacy and ambivalence as a space where ‘dichotomous mythologies of modernity are both contested and reproduced.’⁵¹ Here, modernity acquires an organic sense that best is captured in the corporeality of globally-informed shifts, that is, the simultaneity of multi-layered paradigms that manifest in processes of subject-making. This point clearly is illustrated in my interlocutors’ ‘neither here nor there’ styling of their sexuality and lifestyle, excerpts of which I relate throughout my analysis.

As is the case in China, where ‘the family-kinship system [...] is taken as the basis of the identity of a person,’⁵² in Lebanon, the self is best understood as an ‘extended self’ that is informed by and informs what Suad Joseph terms ‘connective patriarchy,’

⁴¹ Pervuez Mody (2008) *The Intimate State: Love-Marriage and the Law in Delhi* (New Delhi: Routledge); and Maya Mikdashi (2014) *Sex and Sectarianism: The Legal Architecture of Lebanese Citizenship, Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 34(2), pp. 279–293.

⁴² Mody, ‘The Intimate State,’ p. 278.

⁴³ Nicole Constable (2009) *The Commodification of Intimacy: Marriage, Sex, and Reproductive Labor, Annual Review of Anthropology*, 38, pp. 49–64.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See for example Joya Misra, Jonathan Woodring & Sabine N. Merz (2006) The Globalization of Care Work: Neoliberal Economic Restructuring and Migration Policy, *Globalizations*, 3(3), pp. 317–332; and Leslie K. Wang (2013) Unequal Logics of Care: Gender, Globalization, and Volunteer Work of Expatriate Wives in China, *Gender & Society*, 27(4), pp. 538–560.

⁴⁶ C. J. Fuller & Haripriya Narasimhan (2008) Companionate Marriage in India: The Changing Marriage System in a Middle-Class Brahman Subcaste, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14(4), p. 737.

⁴⁷ Shalini Grover (2009) Lived Experiences: Marriage, Notions of Love, and Kinship Support Amongst Poor Women in Delhi, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 41(1), p. 3.

⁴⁸ Fuller & Narasimha, ‘Companionate Marriage in India,’ p. 571.

⁴⁹ Patricia Uberoi (1998) The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32(2), p. 306.

⁵⁰ Grover, ‘Lived Experiences.’

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 104.

⁵² Chou Wah-Shan (2000) *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-sex Eroticism in Chinese Societies* (New York: The Haworth Press).

a deeply-rooted organizational matrix that constructs the very patterns of relationality and the fabric of Lebanese social life.⁵³ The enmeshment of personal status laws with sect construes marriage as a societal event that strengthens Lebanon's distinct sectarian communities, in addition to providing a venue for social mobility within each.⁵⁴

The Gendered Politics of Strategic Nomadic Marriages

In her political economy examination of sexuality, Gayle Rubin conceives the 'sex/gender system' as 'the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied.'⁵⁵ Rubin's sex/gender paradigm is well-illustrated in the gendered body politics that coincide with the strategic marriages I encountered. Many of my homo-desiring female interlocutors found themselves reduced to their female gender at some point during their marriage negotiations. Their negotiations are marked not by their ability to persuade, but by the larger paradigms that construct societal perceptions of their womanhood, and depending on the intersectionality of class, gender, and nationality, different outcomes are recorded. Four main areas informed my interlocutors' choice of partner: financial stability in return for a foreign passport (or vice versa), passing and acting 'straight,' the duration of the marriage, and whether or not to have children. I refrain from discussing each separately since they do not manifest in a clear-cut fashion.

Dalia, one of the first interlocutors with whom I spoke, is a twenty-nine year old self-identified lesbian Lebanese national who migrated to Australia with her family in 1986. Whereas her finances are 'nothing special,' her Australian passport 'gives her the upper hand' in her relationship with Ziad, a self-identified gay Lebanese man in his early thirties, who, like Dalia increasingly was being pressured by his kin to 'get married.'⁵⁶ Ziad, like many young Lebanese nationals, resides and works in Dubai. He works as an IT consultant at the headquarters of a nation-wide restaurant chain. Dalia and Ziad officially are engaged. They have recently pushed their wedding's date to 2020 following a death in Ziad's family. They met in the summer of 2017 in their native village in southern Lebanon through mutual contacts.

Although Ziad insists on them having a child at some point, Dalia maintains:

*I have an Australian passport. Ziad never hid the fact that he desires the Australian nationality [she looks at Ziad and both smile]. It is not easy to find a dual-nationality Lebanese woman who is willing to give up four years of her life. This is a major sacrifice. He has everything to gain from marrying me.*⁵⁷

⁵³ Suad Joseph, 'Intimate Selving in Arab Families.'

⁵⁴ For recent scholarship on the topic of personal status laws in Lebanon, see Nelia Hyndman-Rizk (2019) A Question of Personal Status: The Lebanese Women's Movement and Civil Marriage Reform, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 15(2), pp. 179–198; and Mikdashi, 'The Legal Architecture.'

⁵⁵ Gayle Rubin (1975) The Traffic in Women: Notes of the 'Political Economy of Sex,' in Rayna Rapp Reiter (ed) *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press), p. 159.

⁵⁶ Author Interview with Dalia, near Beirut, August 2018.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Dalia and Ziad are planning to live in Australia once they finalize their marriage. Ziad feels particularly nervous about their initial months in Australia, since they will be sharing the same bedroom while staying in Dalia's familiar home in Melbourne:

*We are worried [Dalia intervened to remark that she is not]. I am. Living in the same house as Dalia's parents can be very challenging. I have to put on a show every day. I sometimes worry that I might say or do something stupid. You know, 'a lie has short legs.'*⁵⁸

At this point, Dalia remarks:

*I think you are over-analyzing it. There is much to be done when we get there. You will need to look for a job. That's a full-time commitment! We will move out as soon as you get it. You have good qualifications. It will be fine.*⁵⁹

Dalia introduced Ziad to a number of Lebanese businesses based in Melbourne, and he is relying on her contacts to accelerate his chances of securing employment. At this stage, it is clear that theirs is a win-win situation. Additionally, for Dalia, Ziad's Lebanese nationality is 'priceless':⁶⁰

*I know a lot of LGBT people in Australia. I could easily find an Australian partner. There are lots of straight men who have gay sex. The thing is, my sexuality is not a straightforward one. Am I lesbian? Am I Australian? Am I Muslim? Am I Lebanese? I'm all of these at once and that is one big messy situation to be in. Between my parents, my extended family, my friends, and myself, I am constantly fine-tuning my words. I'm tired. At this stage of my life, Ziad is definitely the best friend I've come to know so far.*⁶¹

Dalia is feminine, beautiful, and could Lebanese hegemonic femininity par excellence, particularly what Catherine Hakim terms 'erotic capital.'⁶² Hakim adds 'erotic capital,' despite some feminists' "moral objections,"⁶³ to Pierre Bourdieu's⁶⁴ well-known economic, cultural and social capitals. Erotic capital, following Hakim, is not defined in sexual terms exclusively. Liveliness, social skills, emotional labour and further elements contribute toward it. Ziad, like Dalia, could also be said to embody a Lebanese hegemonic masculinity. If anything, my couples were unanimous in their views on physical attributes, oftentimes in hegemonic terms. Female partners are expected to be 'pretty' and 'thin' and their male counterparts 'not too overweight,' and 'presentable.' Most importantly, all desired a 'straight-acting' or 'straight-passing' partner, particularly when in public. Such expectations concur with Lebanese society's

⁵⁸ Ibid, Author Interview with Ziad.

⁵⁹ Ibid, Author Interview with Dalia

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Catherine Hakim (2010) Erotic Capital, *European Sociological Review*, 26(5), pp. 499–518.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 499.

⁶⁴ Pierre Bourdieu (1986) The Forms of Capital, in: Imre Szeman, Timothy Kaposy (eds) *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, pp. 81–93 (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell).

distinct 'sex/gender system,' to borrow from Gayle Rubin, whereby societal gendered expectations related to proper male and female behaviour in public hold prevalence over sexual practice.⁶⁵

Physical attributes aside, commitment to homosexuality and the duration of marriage played a major role when choosing a partner. Dalia's Australian passport allows her to negotiate her marriage to Ziad according to her set of rules. This privilege is limited in my work to those women who hold a dual nationality. For the rest, their reality is considerably more complex. Zeena, for instance, an Orthodox Christian who was 'born and raised' in Jbeil, 'hit a wall' ten months into her marriage to Ihssan.⁶⁶ Zeena and Ihssan are both Lebanese nationals. They are the sole couple that holds additional nationality. Both were thirty-two when they married. Ihssan is a professional photographer who owns his own studio and is often away for work. He is the sole financial contributor. Although Zeena does work alongside him, oftentimes managing the studio while he is away, she does not receive a salary per se. Following Zeena, Ihssan's mother became increasingly irritated by her 'not falling pregnant yet.'⁶⁷

*At first, she used to tease me about it. Sometimes, she would joke, and remark that we [Zeena and Ihssan] will be next [to have children]. As the weeks went by, she started asking me rather intimate questions. I felt truly demeaned. Not as a 'wife' but as a woman. She makes the whole process of meeting Ihssan and getting married to him sound like a 'piece of cake' compared to her interferences.*⁶⁸

When I enquired about her options, Zeena told me that she increasingly contemplates the idea of having a child, especially since she has always 'desired motherhood.'⁶⁹ However, and whereas she doesn't view pregnancy itself as the problem, it is the 'aftermath'⁷⁰ of her marriage to Ihssan that she worries about:

*His family is very traditional. I do trust him as a prospective father, and I do not doubt his intentions for a second. But it is not simply about Ihssan and me. I often imagine myself being sidelined and ostracised by his family once we finalize our divorce. I am sure his mother would go to a great length to paint me in a negative image. I am sure she badmouths me all the time. We never got along, his family and me. Perhaps it was a mistake to marry Ihssan. Perhaps I rushed into marrying him. I just wanted to 'get out.'*⁷¹

More recently, however, Zeena told me that she has started taking contraceptive pills and was feeling reluctant about having a child.⁷² According to Zeena, Ihssan has

⁶⁵ For an excellent study on the shortcomings of sexual identity, including LGBTQI categories in relation to the MENA's sex/gender system, see Nof Nasser-Edin, Nour Abu-Assab & Aydan Greatrick (2018) Reconceptualising and Contextualizing Sexual Rights in the MENA Region: Beyond LGBTQI Categories, *Gender & Development*, 26(1), pp. 173–189.

⁶⁶ Author's Skype interview with Zeena, March 2017.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Author Skype Interview with Zeena, January 2019.

been having sexual relationships with a number of women, despite him ‘committing to remaining in strict homosexual relations,’ like her.⁷³ These occurrences distressed Zeena, who confided in me:

*Marriages like ours are not meant to act as a carte blanche to do as one pleases. He never once told me about his hetero desires. He is free to live his life the way he wants it, but you would expect more honesty from your partner. A divorced man does not have to deal with societal judgments, unlike a woman. Not to mention that my finances are rather limited. It's not like I could simply take off and leave. A part of me feels stuck.*⁷⁴

It is evident that an intersectional analysis is best for capturing the irregularities in my data. Nationality and class emerged as the two categories that dictate each partner's bargaining scope and reach. Most interestingly, though, for the majority of my couples the religious sect category was of least importance. This is perhaps an expected occurrence given my interlocutors' prioritization of their homo desire over identity politics. Instead, they emphasize ‘*insijam*’ or compatibility. *Insijam* is a particular affect whereby the couple prioritizes ‘the practical issues of financial security and the ability of a couple's families to get along, as well as shared expectations of married life.’⁷⁵ The relegation of sect to a lesser preoccupation could be the result of the transnational setting in which these strategic marriages – with the exception of Zeena and Ihssan, take place. In fact, the totality of my interlocutors systematically expressed their discontent with Lebanon's institutionalized sectarianism and preferred civil marriage over personal status laws. This is an important point that compels us to account seriously for possible correlations between political beliefs and non-normative desire.⁷⁶ Having conducted fieldwork among cis heterosexual couples, I can say confidently that the category of sect is a quintessential element when it comes to choosing a partner.⁷⁷

Further uneven body politics are found in the life stories of Lydia and Shereen. Lydia is a naturalized US citizen with regular income. She resides in New York and works as a data analyst for a large international organization. She is eager to have a child but is not necessarily interested in marriage. At the same time, she is ‘very fond’ of Lebanon and she and her family regularly visit it.⁷⁸ For Lydia, a Lebanese partner is ‘a natural choice.’⁷⁹ Lydia recounts Lebanon's strong familial links in a dreamy fashion and laments her feelings of being uprooted in the United States:

*If it weren't for my family's proximity to me, I don't think I would have lasted that long in New York.*⁸⁰

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Fida Adely (2016) A Different Kind of Love: Compatibility (*Insijam*) and Marriage in Jordan, *Arab Studies Journal*, 24(2), p. 103.

⁷⁶ For an excellent discussion on emerging and alternative politics of desire in Lebanon, see Hyndman-Rizk, ‘A Question of Personal Status.’

⁷⁷ Sabiha Allouche (2019b) Love, Lebanese Style: Toward an Either/And Analytic Framework of Kinship, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 15(2), pp. 157–178.

⁷⁸ Author Interview with Lydia, near Jbeil, Lebanon, April 2017.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Lydia has been married to Salim for three years now. They met while he was pursuing his doctoral studies in New York. Salim is from an upper class Beirut family with thorough transnational links. Canada, France, the UK and Mexico are some of the destinations that inform his extended family's transnational links. According to Salim, he and Lydia 'hit it off immediately.'⁸¹ They both are 'leftist, liberals, and secular.'⁸² In addition, they both wish to become parents. Since copulation is 'out of question,'⁸³ they are considering artificial insemination instead. For another couple, Shereen and Adel, sex is not out of the question. They have been married for three years and both reside and work in Marseilles. When I told them about Lydia and Salim's decision to use artificial insemination, they both laughed it off. Shereen commented that it was 'a step too far,' and Adel considered it a 'waste of money,' before adding:

*Having sex is natural. Having children is natural. We haven't had sex since Shereen became pregnant. Would we have sex again if we wished for another child? Most likely, even if our fortunes changed all of a sudden and we could afford artificial insemination. It's just sex!*⁸⁴

Shereen and Adel's nonchalance was unique among my couples, and their partnership could be juxtaposed with Rita and Massoud, who live rather separate lives. Massoud is well into his thirties. He divides his time between Lebanon and Morocco, where he resides. His proximity to the Spanish mainland and his well-paid job allows him to invest in 'sex-escapes' to Spain all year-round. Today, discretion engulfs his every move and word; this, however, was not the case in his youth. His 'flagrant' ways unnerved his father for years, and his mother had to endure the latter's abuse, notably her 'failure in raising him properly.'⁸⁵ Eventually, and according to Massoud, he learned to keep his sexuality to 'himself.'⁸⁶

Massoud limits his same-sex encounters to partners in Spain. According to Massoud, 'being gay and Arab (he is half-Arab from his father's side) comes with the hefty baggage of engaging in "home-truths" conversations.'⁸⁷ He strictly dates western gay men who, like him, are based in Tangiers. Today, he is in a long-term relationship with Juan, a Spanish social worker based in Cádiz. It takes him no less than three hours to drive the distance between Tangiers and Cádiz. His marriage to Rita, a lesbian Lebanese woman who, in her own words is 'avert to marriage,'⁸⁸ did not slow down his relationship with Juan. For Rita, Tangiers, despite the 'long days and the loneliness'⁸⁹ she feels are a welcome escape from kin pressure:

⁸¹ Author Skype Interview with Salim, April 2017.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Author Skype Interview with Shereen and Adel, September 2019. Since our last Skype interview earlier this year, Adel and Shereen have welcomed a baby girl. They continue to live together.

⁸⁵ Author Skype Interview with Massoud, August 2017.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Author Interview with Rita, near Beirut, May 2017.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

*I had to get out from Lebanon. It's a constant barrage of nagging. You lose sense of yourself. There isn't much for me to do in Tangiers. It makes me angry. I'm wasting my youth away. But it's worth it. It's a small price to pay in return for some peace of mind.*⁹⁰

Unlike Massoud, who continues to pursue his relationship with Juan, Rita spends her days between her work (she works as a receptionist in a four-star hotel near the port) and her house. She is not particularly interested in 'finding love.'⁹¹ After all, she views her marriage to Massoud as a 'break:'

*I know one day we will go our separate ways. But no one will be able to say that I didn't give marriage a try.*⁹²

I told Rita about the many couples I have come across. Like her, several interlocutors showed interest in being introduced to each other, usually through me. In Lebanon, Rita, like the few lesbian Lebanese women with whom I have interacted, had built herself a small but solid network of homo-desiring friends. Theirs is a non-conventional yet credible view of what a long-term household consists:

*We all work. We have an OK revenue. It is not diamonds and pearls, but we manage fine. We do rely on each other for financial and emotional support. A few of us are now sharing flats together, and some no longer are being pressured by their parents, who finally seem to get it. We are like a family. It can be very tense though. There is a lot of jealousy and envy at times.*⁹³

When I enquired about her own and her lesbian network's sex lives, Rita replied:

*It's not as much about having a good sex life. It's about avoiding a hyper masculine and hyper patriarchal existence. It can be suffocating at times. My ex-flatmate is not lesbian. She simply wishes not to get married, but at the same time, nobody wants to live alone.*⁹⁴

Rita willingly puts her life on hold while anticipating a better future, largely defined by her spending the remainder of her life unmarried. She is certain that 'she won't live to see the day' when same-sex desire becomes 'normalized' in Lebanese society.⁹⁵ If anything, she tells me that she is 'not interested' in mobilizing under the rubric of LGBT rights,⁹⁶ a point that most of my interlocutors stressed. Similarly, Gilda, who is currently caring for Sameer in Michigan, following his diagnosis with colon cancer, recounts some of the political grievances that ensue from her hybrid self.⁹⁷ Reflecting on her last long-term lesbian relationship, she says:

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ I recently contacted Gilda, who informed me that Sameer has been given the 'all-clear' (Skype Interview with Gilda, January 2019).

*We'd been together for six years. We first noticed cracks in our relationship when same-sex marriage was legalized [in the US]. I didn't feel particularly happy about it. It meant little to me. It is not as if people like me can simply get married to their chosen one. There are worlds apart between her upbringing and mine, and to be honest I'm tired of explaining.*⁹⁸

Like most of my interlocutors, Gilda's narrative conveys 'a neither here nor there' logic that recalls the hybridised,⁹⁹ multiple,¹⁰⁰ and flexible¹⁰¹ rubrics that characterize postcolonial subjectivities. When, and if the topic of their sexuality surfaced, they exhibited Kenyan-based queer scholar Keguro Macharia's notion of the 'indifferent native,'¹⁰² and rightly so.

Taking on the task of the 'complaining native,'¹⁰³ Macharia clearly depicts the gap between the celebrated and quasi-utopian 'black queer' narrative encountered in western queer scholarship, and its 'illegibility'¹⁰⁴ on Kenyan soil. Precisely, a 'sense of deracination overwhelms'¹⁰⁵ him and critical scholarship itself cannot offer him respite. Macharia's feeling of being overwhelmed and uprooted are reflective of the disconnect between the theory and the theorized. He is not interested in defining the queer elsewhere, nor in relation to US scholarship; nor does he impose his higher US-educated intellect on his native Kenya. In the same vein, I do not attempt to politicize my interlocutors' queerness in any shape, size or form. In fact, my interlocutors' queerness never constituted a starting point in my conversations with them. We did, on the other hand, draw parallels between the 'impossibility' of their desire with the 'impossibility' of Lebanon as a whole. Both loci, i.e., their desire and Lebanon, constitute sites where their hopes and grievances converge.

Yet, it remains to ask: How do we transform indifference into a productive narrative? Can we afford to be indifferent? Perhaps the answer lies in we global south sexuality scholars shielding each other from the emotional burden that dictates our writing by taking some load off each other every now and then and complaining, in vein with Macharia. I can imagine a room full of scholars who have identified different normativities in myriad contexts. I can also hear them rightly bemoan the inevitable exercise of explaining, yet again, the disconnect between US queer scholarship and their context of research for a large audience that is adamant on queering, irrespective of historicity, and who is yet to educate itself about the heterogeneity of our world, notably the multitude of postcolonial ways of being and doing that easily provincialize Eurocentric epistemes.

⁹⁸ Author Interview with Gilda, near Beirut, September 2017.

⁹⁹ Timothy Brennan (2008) Postcolonial Studies and Globalization Theory, in Revathi Krishnaswamy & John C. Hawley (eds), *The Post-colonial and the Global*, pp. 37–53 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press).

¹⁰⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute).

¹⁰¹ Aihwa Ong (1999) *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

¹⁰² Keguro Macharia (2016) On Being Area-Studied: A Litany of Complaint, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 22(2), pp. 183–189.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 187.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 184.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 185.

Methodological Conclusions: ‘Area Impossible’¹⁰⁶

The nomadic feature of SNMs depicts the non-mutuality between space and time at the epistemic level and brings forth what Anjali Arondekar and Patel Geeta conceive as ‘area impossible’: the encapsulation of the implication of the uneasy links between area studies and queer studies. Rather than centering discussions of the household around equal responsibilities, as feminist scholars often argue, and far from rethinking child-rearing, motherhood or fatherhood from a conventional queer analysis in light of same-sex marriage legislations, I posit the household as an abode that is driven primarily by friendship. Friendship, hereafter, is akin to a futurity that surpasses the gendered mundane and where families are thought and forged alongside politics of care that largely displace conventional attributes of time, space, presence and proximity. In Lebanon, increasing numbers of young men and women are invested in reforming the personal status laws and paving the way for inter-sectarian relationships.¹⁰⁷ For the larger Lebanese public, their work translates in novel imaginings, narratives, visual and auditory depictions and sensorial experiences that hitherto only wishfully have been thought.

I argue that transnational queer activism must prioritize the household as always becoming and self-crafted as opposed to focusing on legalizing same-sex marriage – a point that coincides with intersectional queer feminists’ critique of the gendered, racialized and sexed logics of the nuclear, urban and consuming family, arguably the smallest manageable unit whose replication promulgates global unequal status quos.

Contemporary Euro-American interpretations of the queer have long posited kinship and reproductive heterosexuality as antithetical to authentic queer life. On this point, Elizabeth Engebretsen argues that these interpretations ‘oversimplify what is after all complex social processes and experiences’¹⁰⁸ because they universalize a supposedly common experience of the gay, lesbian or else.

In the Middle East, these tensions have been documented amply in what has become known as the ‘Joseph Massad debate.’¹⁰⁹ Massad argues that privileged Western LGBT activist groups, which he terms the ‘Gay International,’ impose a singular understanding of a sexuality predicated on Euro-American histories and social formations upon non-western societies.¹¹⁰ One could argue that the SNMs I relate in my work do challenge Massad’s epistemic logic. The homo-desiring interlocutors whose lived realities, aspirations and tribulations I draw upon directly contradict Massad’s logic of same-sex practices that operate outside of identitarian paradigms. They do, however, show the limited impact of the institution of marriage for the fulfilment of same-sex desire. The institutionalisation of marriage in Lebanon constructs desire(s) and romantic attachments parallel to the larger apparatus of ‘connective patriarchy,’¹¹¹ thus contributing to upholding the status quo, i.e., sectarian affiliations and personal status laws. Conversely, SNMs emerge as a fluctuating and unsteady type of union that befits the ambiguity of the ‘sex/gender systems’¹¹² of global south societies, our analysis of which must prioritize a

¹⁰⁶ Arondekar & Patel, ‘Area Impossible.’

¹⁰⁷ See also Sabiha Allouche (2019c) Queering Heterosexual (Inter-sectarian) Love in Lebanon, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 51(4), pp. 547–565.

¹⁰⁸ Engebretsen, ‘Queer Women in Urban China,’ p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ See Joseph Massad (2009) The West and the Orientalism of Sexuality: Joseph Massad Talks to Ernesto Pagano, *Reset Doc*; and I Criticize Gay Internationalists Not Gays: Joseph Massad Counter-replies to Ghassan Makarem, *Reset Doc*.

¹¹⁰ Joseph Massad (2002) Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World, *Public Culture*, 14(2), pp. 361–385.

¹¹¹ Joseph, ‘Intimate Serving in Arab Families.’

¹¹² Rubin, ‘The Traffic in Women.’

‘sexual practice and gender performance’ framework instead of the more mainstream and universalising framework of ‘sexual orientation and gender identity.’¹¹³

My article moves beyond the question of identity politics in the context of the Middle East queer and examines it in relation to gender roles instead. Whereas it makes no attempt to ask whether ‘faking’ marriage is a subversive practice, it does take the lived realities of the men and women on whose experiences it draws as given. It relates their different yet normative intimate arrangements whilst asking: ‘How do we “interlock categories” and avoid reproducing an “identitarian logics” when interviewing people as “performative operators” or “trouble- making?”’¹¹⁴

Patriarchal bargains and societal negotiations undoubtedly play a fundamental role in SNMs. Nevertheless, I refrain from engaging in an analysis that would result in repetitive paradigms, notably the question of whether SNMs subvert or uphold the institution of marriage. This approach stems directly from the depoliticized stance of my interlocutors, most of whom do not mobilize against Art. 534, let alone actively participate in awareness campaigns and further initiatives related to combating homophobia.¹¹⁵ The gap between the depoliticized stance of my interlocutors and their non-normative desire compels us to recognize queerness as multiple and diverse. It is equally important that we acknowledge the specificity of the Stonewall Riots context from which queer scholarship emerged. The political roots of conventional queer analysis is of little relevance to the distinct ‘sex/gender system’ that shapes SNMs. However, it would be wrong to assume that I am unappreciative of critical Euro-American queer scholarship. It is, after all, the very scholarship that informs each of my politics, my subjecthood, my personhood and my methodology, since it delves at the very heart of existential rhetoric.

Such interrogations translate into a lengthy task and compel us to examine the queer relationally.¹¹⁶ Ella Shohat ponders the uneasy links between gender and sexuality studies and area studies. Her call for a thorough reinterpretation of feminist epistemology through what she calls ‘a relational multicultural feminist project’ offers valuable venues for epistemic solidarity that is informed by southern queer scholarship.¹¹⁷ Shohat rightly points out the ‘fictive unity’ of the so-called ‘Middle Eastern women’ or ‘Latin American gays/lesbians.’¹¹⁸ Her ‘relational approach’ to knowledge production allows me to develop an argument that is not as interested in speaking back to western scholarship as it is invested in asserting the unfinished business that is society – any society. Seen from a liberal lens, the express labelling of my interlocutors’ sexuality is but the reiteration of a colonially-informed corporeality that wrongly presumes a singular universal queer experience.¹¹⁹ Crucially, to conceptualize the queer relationally is to do so ‘without romanticizing the Non-West or blindly accepting the discourses of the West.’¹²⁰

¹¹³ Nasser-Edin et al., ‘Reconceptualising and Contextualizing Sexual Rights in the MENA Region.’

¹¹⁴ Di Felicianantonio and Gadelha, ‘Affect, Bodies and Desire,’ p. 279.

¹¹⁵ Allouche, ‘The Reluctant Queer.’

¹¹⁶ Ella Shohat (2002) Area Studies, Gender Studies, and the Cartographies of Knowledge, *Social Text*, 72, 20(3), pp. 67–78.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Samar Habib (2010) *Islam and Homosexuality* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO); Joseph Massad (2007) *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press); Jason Ritchie (2010) How Do You Say ‘Come Out of the Closet’ in Arabic? Queer Activism and the Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 16(4), pp. 557–575.

¹²⁰ Ashley Tellis & Sruti Bala (2015) *The Global Trajectories of Queerness: Re-Thinking Same-Sex Politics in the Global South* (Leiden & Boston: Brill Rodopi), p. 19.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Dr. Sophie Chamas for her valuable feedback.

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