

Hanadi Al-Samman and Tarek El-Ariss

QUEER AFFECTS: INTRODUCTION

When we and several authors of the articles included here originally debated the idea of this special issue, our aim was to respond to what we perceived as a standstill that locks Middle Eastern queer studies into a premodern Eastern versus modern Western-oriented division. While the East is studied as a repository of tradition with an identifiable sexual and amorous nomenclature, the West is often presented as a fixed hegemonic structure distinct from the East, regardless of the long traditions of cultural exchange and the specific forms of translation and dialogue that take shape when the identities and models of desire associated with the West travel or are performed outside it or at its periphery. This division has generated a set of binaries pertaining to the applicability of terms (gay, lesbian, homosexual) and theoretical frameworks (queer theory) to Middle Eastern literary and cultural contexts. It is our belief that critical engagements with queer Arab and Iranian sexualities in literature and culture ought to situate current discussions in queer theory within debates and concerns arising from specific Middle Eastern social and political realities.

Focusing on modern literature and culture, this issue examines queer Middle Eastern models of identification and desire by activating dynamic and comparative readings in between and beyond East and West, classical and modern, and the literary and the political. A productive understanding of the transformation and fluctuation of the discourses on sexuality in Middle Eastern cultural production requires lateral readings that are etymological and political, comparative and interdisciplinary. This issue addresses the multiplicity of layers, discourses, and cultural models within a diverse landscape where identities are not fixed or neatly associated with particular ideological models or traditional practices, but are often in a state of tension and uneasiness. The issue presents studies that move the discussion from the politics of representation and the reading of queer Middle Eastern sexuality as exclusively symptomatic of imperialist and colonial agendas toward engagements with it as a complex site of meaning and transformation. The aim of our intervention is to identify multiple sites of coding and recoding in order to investigate queerness in moments of play, performance, contradiction, dissonance, and evanescence.

Hanadi Al-Samman is an Associate Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.; e-mail: ha2b@virginia.edu. Tarek El-Ariss is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Tex.; e-mail: tarek.elariss@austin.utexas.edu.

© Cambridge University Press 2013 0020-7438/13 \$15.00

In line with recent scholarship by Afasaneh Najmabadi, Kathryn Babayan, Frédéric Lagrange, Sahar Amer, and others, this issue activates a dialogue, “sometimes comfortable, sometimes tense,”¹ in order to complicate the binaries of the closet/coming out, shame/pride, and complicity/resistance, investigating cultural and identitarian models in the making. In *Crossing Borders: Love between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures*, Sahar Amer highlights the dialogue between Arabic and French texts, arguing that it is only through attention to this dialogue that we can identify a lesbian-like identity in medieval French texts.² *Queering* French medieval literature takes place through a back and forth between Arabic and French languages, texts, and cultural contexts. Exploring philology and social practices, registers of sexuality and war, this kind of comparative approach, attentive to detail and subtlety, engaging and problematizing queer theory, is taken up in various ways by the following articles.

One of the promising sites explored in this issue is the attention to queer affects, in which explorations of how subjectivities and desires embodied through forms of viscosity and attachment tend to bridge the local/global and East/West divide. Heather Love has identified the queer site of the future in what she calls the “after sex” zone where one “mov[es] away from both evidentiary claims about same-sex desire and acts, and also from a specific focus on gay and lesbian” identity politics, toward a queer understanding attuned to “affect, citizenship, the death drive, diaspora, digitality, disability, empire, friendship, globalization, the impersonal, indirection, kinship, living underground, loss, marginality, melancholia, migration, neoliberalism, pedagogy, performativity, publicity, self-shattering, shame, shyness, sovereignty, subversion, temporality, and terrorism.”³ Affects of silence, madness, and possession examined in several articles in this issue perform different interventions, breakdowns, and interrogations. Affect is not only within these texts but also in between them. Approaching Middle Eastern queer identities and sexualities through these frames allows the authors to read affects of lust, madness, shame, silence, pity, terror, empathy, and disgust—often excluded from political readings of representation and from literary emphases on the figurative—as transformative sites for the emergence of queer identifications that are always, as Christopher Pullen puts it, in a state of “dialogic becoming.”⁴

The articles in this issue offer innovative terrains for analyzing queer Middle Eastern articulations in literature and culture from the 19th into the 21st centuries. Each takes up particular acts of translation, recoding, and performance. In “Genus of Sex or the Sexing of *Jins*,” Afasaneh Najmabadi explores the transformation from *jins* as categorization to *jins* as sex in modern Iran in ways that account for the convergence of linguistic, temporal, and cultural exchanges. The centrality of *shahvat*/lust as an affect denoting desire, coupled with “practices, regeneration, and naming of body parts,” she argues, is an essential register that enabled the transplanting of such desire from classical Perso-Islamic literature to the contemporary sociocultural Iranian context. When examined through the lenses of traditional *fiqh* and contemporary psychology, the “translational transplantation” of lust has produced recognition of transexuality in ways that are both Islamic and modern, wary of homosexual bodies yet accommodating of transexual souls. This complex configuration creates a space for negotiations and dialogic becoming of transsexual identities; contested as it may be, it offers a chance for “living livable and loving lives within terms of ambiguity and contingent performances of selves-in-situational conduct.”

The focus on lust as a performative, local site for queer becoming is parallel to the affect of shame that, in Dina Georgis's article "Queer Arab Shame in *Bareed Mista3jil*," is equally productive in constituting Middle Eastern queer identities. In her reading of a collection of short stories and diaries by queer Arab women from Lebanon, Georgis exposes the instability of the binary of shame/pride that has often governed the reading of Arab queerness through the notion of the closet. Her focus on the economy of affect helps to move the discussion "beyond civilizational binaries and divisions." In particular, Georgis explores the creative potential of "shame" as a site of signification, inflected by affect and performance, that presents a new terrain for analyzing forms of lesbian social and sexual identification in-between the modernity/tradition divide. By tapping into the painful registers of shame, the article explores the myriad ways in which "affects animate meaning." In this context, "writing shame" becomes the modality through which queer identities can be constituted from within their local and cultural milieu. Only in this manner can a "dyke wearing hijab," for example, perform both traditional homosexual and modern queer belonging, expressing both piety and provocation.

Strange bedfellows are invoked in another set of queer associations, that of the homosexual and the terrorist in Michael Allan's contribution. In "Queer Couplings: Formations of Religion and Sexuality in 'Ala' al-Aswani's *Imarat Ya'qubyan*," Allan challenges common readings of the novel and film *Imarat Ya'qubyan* that use civilizational rhetoric and homonationalist discourse, in Jasbir Puar's sense, in order to "instrumentalize gay rights for nationalist claims of tolerance while simultaneously ostracizing communities deemed intolerant." In his pairing of two unconventional characters, the homosexual and the terrorist, Allan articulates parallel modes of persecution apparent through their common fate. In this manner, he unsettles the alignment of civilizational discourse with gay rights and calls for situating queer politics in the context of religious and cultural politics. Surprisingly, this parallel between two seemingly opposed identities complicates the traditional homosexual narrative as it allows for the imagining of "parallels, analogies, and common struggles across the politics of difference." By resisting easy binary interpretations, Allan's intervention invites queer readings that activate empathy and "reinvigorate solidarity across identity categories" with outwardly different orientations but markedly shared futures.

Khalid Hadeed's "Homosexuality and Epistemic Closure in Modern Arabic Literature" examines depictions of homosexuality in novels by Sa'd Allah Wannus, 'Ala' al-Aswani, and Hoda Barakat. Hadeed argues that manifestations of male homosexuality in contemporary Arabic literature have abided by an "epistemic closure" formula, in which homosexual subjects face death in fulfillment of essentialist and/or constructionist narrative plots that conform to strict rules of center and periphery, heterosexual and homosexual. Through a nuanced approach comparing novels that conform to the death mandate with ones that contest it, Hadeed demonstrates the challenges of adhering to these formulas and reads them as moments of tension filled with affects of love, hate, shame, and pity. These moments reveal a liminal space of queer identities where homosociability and homosexuality coalesce and collapse in contestation of "epistemic closure" mandates.

Heeding utterances and performances of homosexuality as madness, Tarek El-Ariss's "Majnun Strikes Back: Crossings of Madness and Homosexuality in Contemporary Arabic Literature" straddles contemporary psychology and cultural and historical forms

of desire to further critique the restrictive Western/Eastern and modern/premodern dyad. He investigates the discourse of madness as a site of signification in contemporary expressions of homosexuality in Arabic literature. El-Ariss deconstructs the modernity/tradition binary through a critical reading of Foucault alongside a rigorous engagement with the Arabic cultural discourse on love and madness. His article identifies sites of resistance to both modern interpretations and traditional forms of homosexuality's enunciation and codification. The article demonstrates that fixed notions of the modern and the traditional, East and West, break down in the performance of sexuality identified in contemporary Arabic novels. The performance of queerness as madness in novels by Hanan al-Shaykh and Hamdi Abu Golayyel shifts the emphasis from the modernity/tradition binary to subversion and critique of the political at various levels.

An active engagement with the political and the ways in which it intersects with forbidden sexuality and with affects of madness, anger, and disgust also characterizes Haytham Bahooora's article "Baudelaire in Baghdad: Modernism, the Body and Husayn Mardan's Poetics of the Self." Disgust unites poet and reader at the intersections of the demonic with illicit sexuality and authoritative nationalism. Bahooora argues that Iraqi poet Mardan's repudiation of the romantic sentiments and rural myths of rebirth common among his contemporaries in 1950s Iraq is a rejection of certain aspects of modernity and postcolonial politics. Mardan's insistence on exploring the obscene in his poetics reflects a deep skepticism toward colonial and postcolonial historical transformations, which produced authoritarian states infiltrating the public and private realms of their citizens with elaborate surveillance apparatus. His poetry reveals the forgotten aspects of modernity and the uninhibited sites of contaminated and demonic desires ruled by the affect of disgust. In opposition to modernity's tendency "to marginalize the filthy and [the] unsightly, Mardan's discourse of embracing filth acts as a countercultural version of modernity," where dis-ease and disgust act as regenerative sites for alternative politics and sexualities.

Affect as a productive analytical tool for exploring lust, shame, empathy, terror, madness, and disgust offers innovative approaches that bridge linguistic, temporal, and geographic divides prevalent in scholarly debates. In its focus on emotions experienced by subjectivities that are local and global, premodern and modern, East and West, *Queer Affects* invites scholars to think beyond and in between these binaries. It is our hope that the unique and timely contribution of these articles will help move the debates over Middle Eastern queer studies into new domains. They are invested in close readings and careful analyses, recognizing and theorizing models of desire that are taking shape in the interplay of performance, translation, comparison, and queer becoming.

NOTES

Authors' note: We express our gratitude to *IJMES* editors Beth Baron and Sara Pursley for seeing this project through from its inception and for the many anonymous reviewers whose perceptive comments shaped and informed the arguments of our contributors. This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Ramzi Zakharia (1964–2010), a human rights activist who did so much to promote tolerance and justice on LGBT issues, Palestine, and women's rights.

¹Valerie Traub, "The Past Is a Foreign Country? The Times and Spaces of Islamicate Sexuality Studies," in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Center for Middle East Studies, 2008), 2.

²Sahar Amer, *Crossing Borders: Love between Women in Medieval French and Arabic Literatures* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

³Heather Love, "Queers___This," in *After Sex? On Writing since Queer Theory*, ed. Janet Halley and Andre Parker (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), 182.

⁴Christopher Pullen, "LGBT Transnational Documentary 'Becoming,'" in *LGBT Transnational Identity and the Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).