

**The London School of Economics and Political  
Science**

*“And they say there aren’t any gay Arabs...”:  
Ambiguity and Uncertainty in Cairo’s Underground  
Gay Scenes*

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## DECLARATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores issues of subjectivity, collective identity, relatedness and class among young men on Cairo's underground gay scenes. My thesis, based on 18 months of ethnographic research (November 2009-March 2011) among in Cairo, focuses on the diversity of ways in which 'gay' identities are embraced, questioned, and critiqued through the day to day activities of life in the city, and the construction of spaces in which the men move.

The thesis analyzes various forms of instability and ambiguity relating to men's sexuality both on the individual and scene levels. I argue that while a sense of precarity and ambiguity permeates the scene because of security concerns, the elusiveness of recognition both in relation to the state and the family, as well as internal fragmentation along class lines, it allows for a certain creativity as men cultivate and continually invest in the sociocultural maintenance of a 'gay scene'. Through an examination of performance styles that are heavily influenced by a scene-specific form of camp aesthetics as well as scene-level narratives, I argue that such efforts are attempts at creating a sense of collective identity and permanence on a scene that is all too often experienced as unstable and ephemeral. While this project addresses the very real difficulties men face as homosexuals in Egypt (prosecution, social ostracism and harassment) it illustrates how men take hold of the liminal positions they occupy and experience, and in the process raise important questions about articulations of sexuality, class, and national positioning vis-à-vis a global imaginary.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Perched high above lamppost pocked streets and stubby darkened buildings, Malek and John's tenth floor flat was still an uproarious bevy of activity at three in the morning. The crowded living areas rang and rumbled with the thumping of bass-lines, the hum excited chatter and the piercing trills of laughter and giggles. We had started the night at another 'scene party', a birthday-cum-leaving do aptly titled 'a touch of pink' about a ten minute car ride from Malek and John's. Following persistent and repeated threats by neighbours to call the police in protest over the racket, the entire party had migrated over to its new home for the night. As I had made my way into their building with several other men the elderly security guard had shot us a despondent look of disapproval and had, in wide-eyed disbelief, exclaimed 'do you have any idea what time it is?! It's too late for you to have only just arrived for a visit!' Unable to assuage the guard's disapproval the men simply clambered into the elevator but warned that there were more visitors to come. The party hustle and bustle rolled into the early hours of the morning in a riotous swell of social activity. Greased with a more-than-ample supply of alcoholic beverages, this social locomotion trundled forward in pockets of engrossed conversation, mild and wild flirtations and flurries of both swift and jittery dance moves. At one point during the evening's festivities Malek, intoxicated and shaking his hips, had turned to me and exclaimed 'and they say there aren't any gay Arabs!'*

Malek meant his remark as a humorous reference to a conversation we had had a few days earlier about Joseph Massad's book 'Desiring Arabs' (Massad 2007). In the book's most contentious chapter and the one that drew the most ire from my informants, Massad launches a scathing critique of what he views as 'proselytizing missions' by the 'Gay International' (a term he coined for the network of Western gay rights activists, organizations and their local representatives) (Massad 2002, Massad 2007) whom he argues have been engaged in an orientalist project to create a gay subject or subjects where none had existed prior to such efforts (I will return to Massad's critique of the 'Gay

international' later in this introduction). As Malek had danced, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, his pointed reference to Massad's claims was a clear statement that 'this was the Egyptian scene' , this was a burgeoning social field that could not be denied or discounted as the product of the forces of Westernization.

This thesis is about the gay-identified men who regularly participated in and together made up Cairo's underground gay scenes during the period of my fieldwork (November 2009-March 2011). It is an examination of the social dimensions of same-sex sexuality in Cairo, gay men's efforts to cultivate 'a Cairene gay scene' and the forms that such a scene took.

The context of this research has been greatly shaped by the 2001-2004 crackdown on homosexuality by the Egyptian security apparatus. Despite the fact that most of my informants had not been around on the scene to experience its full force, the 2001 crackdown on Cairo's gay community had, nevertheless, left an indelible mark on their imaginations. They were still haunted by the images of those men arrested as they had appeared time and time again in stifling courtrooms, their eyes peeping sheepishly and hauntingly through makeshift masks they had fashioned out of whatever fabric they could get their hands on in order to keep their identities secret. The images had shown them gripping onto iron bars and mesh that separated them from courtrooms crammed with reporters and flashing cameras. Eager family members were left to frantically wander the halls outside the courtroom while reporters were permitted to enter so as to expose and humiliate that group of men that had 'threatened the moral security of the nation'. Those were the images my informants were confronted with as, most of them teenagers at the time, they struggled to deal with their sexualities.

In 2001 the Cairo Vice Squad, under the tutelage of Taha Embaby, had mounted a campaign against the Cairene gay community (HRW 2004). The regime had acknowledged but tacitly tolerated Cairo's fledgling gay scene up until this unprecedented attack and consequently, this crackdown had announced the radical and unanticipated break with a preceding tradition of turning a blind eye to the scene's existence. Sporadic and un-orchestrated arrests had taken place



prior to the crackdown but this particular campaign was the first to target gay men as a collectivity and to employ a rhetoric that framed this clampdown as a defense of national honor and social morality (Bahgat 2001, HRW 2004, Long 2004). The public nature of the trials was just as much about the Mubarak regime's attempt to position itself as rightful guardian of Egyptian honor and virtue (particularly in light of the advent of the Muslim Brotherhood as an oppositional political force at the time) as it was about the media's hunger for salacious news stories and the public positioning of homosexuality outside the bounds of societal and religious propriety (Bahgat 2001, El Menyawi 2006, HRW 2004, Long 2004).

This campaign culminated on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May in a police raid on the Queen Boat, a floating nightclub moored on the banks of the Nile that had become popular among gay men (El Menyawi 2006, HRW 2004). The Vice Squad had used 'gay informers' and trolled gay cruising spots in the days leading up to the raid and had already picked up twenty-two men they deemed gay. Those men, in addition to the thirty arrested during that raid, were to become known as the "Cairo 52" or "Queen Boat 52". Following an extended period of questioning and detention during which they were severely and repeatedly beaten, tortured and humiliated they were brought before an Emergency State Security Court for Misdemeanors<sup>1</sup> in July of the same year (HRW 2004, El Menyawi 2006). As I will describe in more detail in the thesis, in the period immediately following the clampdown gay men began withdrawing from those extended networks of social relations facilitated by the scene and gay hangouts became shadows of their former selves.

It was against this backdrop of persecution that the newly burgeoning yet precarious scenes I conducted research amongst were unfolding. When I first arrived in Cairo for fieldwork in the winter of 2009 I was interested in studying questions of identity, community building and mobilization among gay Cairenes in the face of what appeared to be overwhelming attempts by authorities to quell any such efforts and a general social hostility towards any form of organization

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<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian emergency court system was established in 1981 following the assassination

by queer communities. Almost as soon as I began my research I was told time and time again and by various informants that there was no such community and that Cairo's gay community was nothing more than fragmented circles of social relations that had occasion to interact with one another through social or sexual liaisons mediated by internet dating websites. A situation which, I was told, was further exacerbated by the fragmentation of the 'community' along class lines. Nevertheless, there still seemed to be some general understanding of what it meant to be part of an imagined gay collectivity and, at the very least, to be part of 'the scene'. This thesis interrogates what constitutes the scene, how its parameters are drawn and what forms of in-group sociality arise out of it.

Over the course of the research it became apparent that, despite efforts at scene-building and attempts at cleverly negotiating matters pertaining to their sexuality on my informants' part, a sense of precariousness and instability seemed to pervade and permeate through the scene. This thesis is an ethnographic study of the dynamics of instability and ambiguity as they had affected and weave their way through various aspects of scene existence (both on the individual and scene levels). Furthermore, I argue that such destabilizing forces are in constant struggle with the various creative attempts by gay men to 'construct a scene' and continually invest it with meaning. The meaning of a collective identity. As such, the first three chapters in this thesis trace and analyze various forms of instability and uncertainty in relation to the state and the legal treatment of homosexuality (chapter one), to the family (chapter two) and to the scene's internal fragmentation along social class lines (chapter three). The final three chapters examine men's attempts at cultivating the scene as a social and alternative cultural space through efforts at 'gay place-making' (chapter four), a shared historicity through narratives (chapter five) and a scene specific form of camp aesthetics in performance (chapter 5).

### **Sexuality, Sexual Subjectivity and the Constitution of Sexual Subjects**

Before delving into the context and parameters of this research project I would like to return to and engage with Massad's work, with which I began the introduction, in order to further explicate how my research relates to wider

questions of sexuality, identity politics and the development of research on sexuality. I will begin by examining Massad's critique of the activities of the 'Gay International' in the Middle East before linking and relating Massad's work to Foucault's writings on the development of sexuality in Western Europe. I will discuss how both Massad and Foucault launch examinations and critiques of how particular forms of discourse create and naturalize certain subjects and 'identities'. Throughout the discussion I will attempt to position my own research and approach to sexuality against the backdrop of these seminal works.

As stated earlier, Massad argues that the 'Gay International' and its supporters produce a discourse that positions the West and liberal identity politics as the progressive, rightful bearers of a civilizing mission to the Muslim world where repressive regimes oppress the rights of 'gay subjects'. Meanwhile, Massad argues, this discourse itself creates subjects or concretizes such subjectivities, to the exclusion of other, perhaps more fluid, interactions between desires, behavior and identities. Massad states that "When the Gay International incites discourse on homosexuality in the non-western world, it claims that the 'liberation' of those it defends lies in the balance. In espousing this liberation project, the Gay international is destroying social and sexual configurations of desire in the interest of reproducing a world in its own image, one wherein sexual categories and desires are safe from being questioned" (2002: 385). Furthermore, Massad argues that it is precisely this form of 'incitement to discourse' (a term he borrows from Foucault) that triggers local backlashes against those subjects which such discourse creates. This, he argues, was the case with the Queen Boat arrests and trials of 2001. Massad opposes the ways in which such discourse posits cross-cultural and ahistorical sexual identity categories as natural and unproblematic.

Massad's critique raises questions similar to those raised and addressed in Foucault's groundbreaking works on sexuality and, more specifically, those pertaining to the constitution of sexual subjects through discourse and to the resignification and the recasting of sexual acts into wider structures of subject production (Foucault 1998(a), Foucault 1998(b)). One of the primary concerns for both Massad and Foucault is the ways and mechanisms by which same-sex

practices are transformed into subject-forming acts through different types of discourse. In Foucault's case, these were the discourses expounded by the then new human sciences in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, primarily the fields of psychoanalysis and sexology. In Massad's case, these are liberal identity politics discourses in relation to sexuality expounded by LGBT rights organizations and their supporters. At this point I think it would be helpful to move to a closer examination of Foucault's work in order to understand the importance of his critique (as well as Massad's) and to gain a better understanding of the claims he was making in relation to sexuality, sexual practices and subjectivity and the creation of the 'homosexual' as subject. By contrasting Foucault and Massad's work, I will not only highlight how they both offer valuable critiques of structures of discursive power in relation to sexuality but also to point to the slight differences in their approaches and my points of difference and departure from Massad's conclusions in relation to his discussion on LGBT rights and identity politics.

Foucault's work on sexuality stems from a wider philosophical and methodological commitment to demystifying the mechanisms and machinations by which discursive constructs are produced and exhibited as both timeless and natural and how such powerful structures are then deployed in the casting of particular subjects and, more specifically, in relation to the human sciences of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. "Among those sciences, sexology is instrumental in objectifying sex as a natural kind, a kingdom of genera and species, the species of the homosexual among them" (Faubion 2014: 12). In his examination of 19<sup>th</sup> century sexological discourse Foucault strove to challenge "...the then accepted radical consensus, which Foucault labels 'the repressive hypothesis', that the demands of the capitalist economy for a pliant workforce had fuelled increasingly severe sexual repression" (Laidlaw 2014: 26). The 'repressive hypothesis' was expounded as received fact and Foucault sought to demystify this misconception and to properly position it within wider structures of discursive power. "Foucault countered (1) that the period had seen no such thing, but an increasingly imperative 'incitement' to discourse about sexual matters; (2) that the resulting 'discursive explosion' saw the constitution of 'sexuality', the idea of the subject's defining essence being revealed in its desires; (3) that power had

therefore come preponderantly to take not the negative form of repression but positive techniques for the elicitation of desires; and finally (4) that projects aiming at the ‘liberation’ of desire therefore constituted not in any serious sense a challenge to the prevailing configurations of power, but instead their intensification” (Laidlaw 2014: 26). It is here that we can very clearly see the parallels and overlaps to be found in Foucault and Massad’s critiques; similarly to Foucault, Massad sees the ‘incitement to discourse’ found in LGBT rights discourse and rhetoric not as a challenge to repressive power but as an intensification of configurations of power in a postcolonial context, which is precisely what strikes Massad as most problematic in the ‘Gay International’'s maneuverings.

Another area where we can clearly see parallels between Foucault and Massad’s work, and one that is most pertinent to the subject of this thesis, is the ways in which a ‘homosexual subject’ is posited in and some would argue created through these two respective discourses. In one of Foucault’s most cited passages he writes;

This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an *incorporation of perversions* and a new *specification of individuals*. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject 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. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality (Foucault 1998(b): 43).

Foucault is pointing specifically to the manner in which, in this regulatory frame, sexual acts took a backseat to sexual desire which then came to represent the totality of a person’s being and identity. Furthermore, Foucault was particularly interested in how such a totalizing view of the person was the result of an attempt at ‘specifying’ a particular, transgressive, perverse and deviant subject within

this discursive framework. Several commentators on Foucault's work have sought to clear up a common misunderstanding of Foucault's arguments with regards to the distinction between sexual acts and subjectivity. Such a misconception takes Foucault's arguments to mean that prior to the psychologizing articulation of a 'homosexual subject' in sexological discourse no distinction was made between different types of sexual actors, but rather only acts in the Western world. As one of the commentators who has sought to clear up this misconception and misinterpretation of Foucault, Halperin argues that those who uphold such a reading of Foucault's are inattentive to the nuances of his analysis (Halperin 1998). Halperin contends that Foucault is primarily making an argument about the ways in which two distinct regulatory frames, that of pre-modern canonical codes and that of nineteenth century psychiatry, disqualified same-sex sexual relations and the difference to be found in modern psychologizing discourse in the creation of a distinct subject of such acts in the process. As Halperin writes, "...Foucault is speaking about discursive and institutional practices, not about what people really did in bed or what they thought about it. He is not attempting to describe popular attitudes or private emotions, much less is he presuming to convey what actually went on in the minds of different historical subjects when they had sex" (Halperin 1998: 97). Halperin continues by writing that Foucault is making a much more nuanced and limited "...contrast between the way something called 'sodomy'..." as it "...was typically defined by the laws of various European states and municipalities and by Christian penitentials and canon law, on the one hand, and the ways something called 'homosexuality' was typically defined by the writings of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century sexologists, on the other" (Halperin 1998: 97).

Foucault's arguments with regards to the construction of the category of 'the homosexual' bear such close consideration because of their affinity to the view espoused by Massad in relation to the constitution of 'gays and lesbians' in the Arab world (through the discourse of the Gay International) and the apparently similar distinction he makes between acts on the one hand, and the positing of a specific subject of such acts in such discourse on the other. Massad argues that what the "Gay International" is attempting to do 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” (Massad 2002: 362). The assumption underlying this statement and the general thrust of Massad’s argument is that, while homosexual sexual acts do today and have in the past existed in the Arab world, the encroaching discourse of the Gay International is transforming those participating in those acts into ‘gay and lesbians’ in the discursive image of Western homosexual subjects. Furthermore, in several points of his discussion, Massad claims that those most transformed by such a discourse are small segments of the Arab population and, in particular, those who belong to a small, Westernized elite. It is at this point in the discussion where I differ and from Massad and his conclusions and where I think he somewhat departs from a Foucauldian analysis. Massad’s critique is persuasive in the ways he describes and problematizes how Western discursive practices in relation to LGBT rights and sexuality tend to foreclose possible sexual subjectivities and configurations of desire and practice that do not fit neatly and wholly within its framework. In particular, I agree not only with Massad’s claim that such discourse limits sexual possibilities but also with his claims that such discourse suffers from an endemic form of orientalism that allows the East/Muslim world to be continually cast as regressive and oppressive thereby justifying further Western interventions. Furthermore, Massad is right to powerfully highlight how “It is not the Gay International or its upper-class supporters in the Arab diaspora who will be persecuted but rather the poor and nonurban men who practice same-sex contact...”who will face the full force of the legal and security establishments. As the reports on the 2001 Egyptian crackdown make clear, those who were most affected were men who had no economic, social or political clout to face the state.

Nevertheless, in this thesis, I argue that Massad overstates the influence of the “Gay International” as a discursive source for a particular form of sexual subjectivity. While such international campaigns certainly represent an intensification in the discursive construction of the ‘homosexual’ as a distinct type of person, psychologizing forms of distinction similar to those discussed by Foucault had already emerged in medical discourse in Egypt. Furthermore, if we

contrast Foucault and Massad's approaches we find that, as Halperin rightly points out, Foucault only examines discursive structures and refrains from discussing empirical material relating to how those participating in specific acts actually experience their subjectivities or how they relay such experiences. In fact, as Foucault points out in an interview in 1983, he "...would say that the homosexual consciousness certainly goes beyond one's individual experience and includes an awareness of being a member of a particular social group" (Foucault 1994: 142). He adds that "Of course, this aspect of their collective consciousness changes over time and varies from place to place. It has, for instance, on different occasions taken the form of membership in a kind of secret society, membership in a cursed race, membership in a segment of humanity at once privileged and persecuted—all kinds of different modes of collective consciousness, just as, incidentally, the consciousness of unskilled laborers has undergone numerous transformations" (Foucault 1994: 143). This statement by Foucault highlights his commitment to deconstructing and critiquing the human sciences and to demystifying the apparent 'naturalness' of sexuality and ahistorical constructions of categories of sexual subjectivity. Nevertheless, Foucault still leaves space for experiences of a collective and shared experience of some form of sexual subjectivity that changes over time.

Unlike Foucault however, Massad does not seem to make allowances for the existence of a consciousness even if it does not fit neatly within Western 'gay' and 'lesbian' identity constructions. Furthermore, rather than contrast two distinct systems for regulating sexual acts and identities, Massad makes statements about how persons experience their sexual subjectivities without concrete empirical data. Therefore, whilst some of Massad's arguments may be persuasive, his conclusions problematically re-inscribe an East/West binary in our analyses of identity politics and sexuality. In such a formulation, the Arab/Muslim world always remains in the position of recipient of such discourse, without the ability to engage with or transform it. Furthermore, what is troubling about Massad's approach is how we can proceed in a situation where such a transformation is already taking place and in a way that does not discount the very real experiences of those who engage in same-sex practices. Such individuals do subscribe to particular sexual subjectivity categories that, while



perhaps Western and at times stifling, are nonetheless real and worthy of engagement. If we turn back to the opening vignette, we find that, as a gay-identified Egyptian man, Malek had been incensed and outraged by what he viewed as a disregard for the lived experiences of Arab queer men and women on Massad's part. More specifically, as an upper-middle class Cairene and as a young Egyptian man living with an American partner many years his senior (who himself worked for a US-based development project) Malek felt that he and many other men like him were unnecessarily vilified by Massad's text. Furthermore, he felt that they were dismissed as a member a 'Westernized' elite, as though this abstract moniker could discount the complexity and specificity of their experiences. As other Egyptian men who had read Massad's book (many had read the contentious chapter in question) reiterated to me time and time again, at issue was not the academic or scholarly merit of Massad's work or the pressing need for a critique of international organizations' work in the Arab world. Rather, at issue was how, in his attempts to rectify an orientalist approach to the study of and politicization of sexualities in the Middle East, Massad had dealt a damaging blow to countless queer men and women from various backgrounds who nevertheless had to deal with the realities of homophobia and discrimination on a daily basis. As Malek's partner's deportation back to the US following the series of support group meetings held at their apartment demonstrated (discussed in greater detail in chapter one), my informants were all too aware of the perils of engaging in any form of organized group-level action let alone championing a gay rights platform in Egypt. Moreover, they have never claimed to be representative of a cohesive, Egyptian queer identity let alone a Middle Eastern one. In fact, most were keenly aware of both local and international efforts to paint them in one light or another. As Ali once told a BBC Arabia film crew working on a story on homosexuality in Arab countries, "you'll find no sob stories here". By here he meant among gay men from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. This thesis does not take sexual identity categories to be universal, timeless truths but nevertheless attempts to seriously engage with the ways certain groups of men in Cairo experience and transform such categories.

It is important to realize that the primary way to creatively transform power configurations involves engaging with and in some sense operating from within but also against them. I think it is helpful once again turn to Foucault since, as Faubion writes, “Freedom for Foucault is very much a thing of this world and it is never absolute. Even in situations in which we are objectively capable of pursuing options, we always also find ourselves enmeshed in ‘power relations’...power relations are not relations of coercion. They constrain. They also leave open possibilities. They are not in a mutually exclusive relationship to freedom. They condition our freedom. They are also liable to being conditioned and reconditioned by it” (Faubion 2014: 6). It is important to point to Foucault’s view of power and freedom because it can be easy to contrast the foreclosure of possibilities due to the globalization of sexual identity discourse with an imagined situation of complete freedom where individuals are able to engage in sexual acts without having said acts affect their subjectivities or to assume that with such a foreclosure newly created sexual subjects are completely trapped within identity categories. We must be able to view situations of constraint as ones where we still nevertheless have space for maneuvering and change.

While Massad engages in a necessary critique of the activities of international rights organizations, his approach seems to ignore or gloss over the complicated ways in which queer men and women relate not only to their sexualities but efforts by local and international forces to paint them in one light or another and to their equally as complicated standing within other forms of structural hierarchies such as Egypt’s wildly unequal class structure. Massad alludes to Egypt’s complicated class structure through various assertions about the ‘Westernization’ of an elite class of gay men but does not accord the true complexity of the interclass relations and their relation to a wider, imagined gay collectivity the attention or analysis it warrants and so we are left with what I think is an inaccurate depiction of men’s (from all class backgrounds, disparate as they may be) experiences of homosexuality and at what appears to be an analytical dead end. The difficulty posed by this notion of ‘westernization’ is that it seems to subscribe to an understanding of globalization that, “While...presumed to offer multiple avenues of intercultural contact...” such “contacts are often constructed in globalizing discourses as following a

unidirectional path in which the West, Western cultures, and the English language stand in as the ‘origin’ of cultural exchanges and non-Western societies occupy the discursive position of ‘targets’ of such exchanges” (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan IV 2002: 6).

Anthropological accounts of same-sex sexual relations are fraught with questions regarding the foreignness of the sexual categories utilized by ethnographers to document and analyze such behavior. The American and European gay rights movements and their utilization of, not only sexual identification categories (such as gay, lesbian or transgendered), but the subversive umbrella category of ‘queer’<sup>2</sup> have presented anthropology with the question of whether or not such labels are appropriate for use in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the development of similar identities in non-Western societies instigated a debate regarding the ‘authenticity’ of such identities and the manner in which to negotiate the study of such communities with region-specific non-heterosexual identities<sup>3</sup>.

The globalization of Western sexual identity categories is addressed by many academics studying sexuality<sup>4</sup> and is addressed directly by Massad in the case of the Middle East. One of the most influential and much debated concepts put forward is that of ‘global queering’ by Altman (Altman 1996, Jackson 2000). The ‘global queering’ model proposes that globalized economic and technological flows from the Western world were accompanied by Western sexual identity categories and the “...globalization of lifestyle and identity politics” (Altman 1996: 33). It would seem that Massad holds a similar view with regards to Middle Eastern sexualities, arguing that Western influences, or the ‘gay international’, have created homosexual or ‘gay’ identities where they do not exist (Massad 2002).

While there is definite need for a critical approach, such as Massad’s, to the ways in which discourse is used in configurations of power and the ways in

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<sup>2</sup> Gamson 1995, Patton 1993, Sedgwick 1990, Seidman 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Such identities are most often ‘third-gender’ identities, such as hijras in India (Nanda 1996), kathoey in Thailand (Jackson 2002) and berdaches (Roscoe 1996) among Native Americans.

<sup>4</sup> Grewal and Kaplan 2001; Povinelli and Chauncey 1999.

which such discourse can close off sexual and non-sexual possibilities, there is an equal need for ethnographic and sociological research that addresses how subjects engage with these discursive constructs. There has been a growing ethnographic literature that studies “...persons outside the West who see themselves as ‘lesbian’ or ‘gay’ in some transformed sense of these terms...” and “...takes non-Western gay and lesbian subjectivities as legitimate forms of selfhood and addresses the role of mass media, consumerism, ethnicity, religion, class, and a range of other factors” (Boellstorff 2007: 22). It is amongst such a literature<sup>5</sup> that I wish to situate this ethnographic endeavor amongst gay Cairenes<sup>6</sup>. Rather than question the actual use of labels such as ‘gay’ amongst my informants, my research unpacks and deconstructs various aspects of this lived gay experience in Cairo in order to analyze the particularities associated with Egyptian gay subjectivities and gay scene construction and identity.

In a seminal review article of gay and lesbian studies in anthropology Weston asserts that, while such accounts were slow to develop, by the 1990s studies of homosexual sociality and behavior were flourishing (Weston 1993: 339). The initial development of this strand of ethnographic research was characterized by ‘ethnography’ and attempted to locate and uncover evidence of same-sex sexual relations across the globe (Weston 1993). The study of non-heterosexual behavior and subjectivities has developed greatly since then and now encompasses research into the intersection of sexuality and race, kinship, politics and history (Boellstorff 2007).

Anthropological accounts of same-sex sexual relations are fraught with questions regarding the ‘foreignness’ of the sexual categories utilized by ethnographers to document and analyze such behaviour. The American and European gay rights movements and their utilization of, not only sexual identification categories (such as gay, lesbian or transgendered), but the umbrella

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<sup>5</sup> Bereket and Adam 2006, Boellstorff 2005, Boellstorff 2007, Carrier 1995, Carillo 2002, Essig 1999, Girman 2004, Lumsden 1996, Manalansan 2003, McLelland 2000, Murray 2002, Parker 1999, Rofel 1999.

<sup>6</sup> For review articles on gay, lesbian and queer anthropology more generally see Weston 1993 and Boellstorff 2007.

category of ‘queer’<sup>7</sup> have presented anthropology with the question of whether or not such labels are appropriate for use in non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the development of similar identities in non-Western societies instigated a debate regarding the ‘authenticity’ of such identities and the manner with which to negotiate the study of such communities with region-specific non-heterosexual identities<sup>8</sup>.

Yet the repertoire of ethnographic works I would like to position my work amongst (including work such as Boellstorff’s, Manalansan’s and Murray’s) take non-West gay subjectivities and analyze and deconstruct them in relation to wider global processes without reducing them to identity category labels and without assuming that such categories are appropriated unproblematically. Boellstorff for example offers “...*dubbing culture* as a metaphor for conceptualizing contemporary globalizing processes, ethnographic practice in an already globalized world and the homologies between these projects of interpretation and reconfiguration...’dubbing culture’ is queer: with dubbing, there can never be a ‘faithful’ translation” (Boellstorff 2005). So in ethnographic projects dealing with sexual identity categories we must examine the ways in which labels such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ are transformed and reconfigured in culturally specific ways. Manalansan for example looks at the ways in which *bakla* and *gay* are used by Filipino men in the diaspora in order to foreground how “...Filipino gay men’s experiences and discourses do not construct a consistent monolithic self...” and suggests “...that these men’s sense of selves are inflected and reconfigured by race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and immigration status” (Manalansan 2003: x). It is only through an examination of the ways in which such selves and identities are experienced and performed as well as how categories are discursively constructed that we can gain a deeper understanding of sexuality.

Throughout my analysis I use the term gay as my informants did, as a category that implies desire for and attraction exclusively to other men but in order to

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<sup>7</sup> Gamson 1995, Patton 1993, Sedgwick 1990, Seidman 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Such identities are most often ‘third-gender’ identities, such as hijras in India (Nanda 1996), kathoey in Thailand (Jackson 2000) and berdaches (Roscoe 1996) among Native Americans.

fully understand how ‘gay’ feeds into and informs these men’s lives and experiences we must look at the ways in which this acknowledgment of exclusive homosexuality influences other subject positions (within the framework of family, chapter two) and how it intersects with questions of class. The deep interconnectedness of sexuality and gender must be addressed however since men’s homosexuality is as much a challenge to their masculinity as it is to their related and assumed heterosexuality. The interrelatedness of sexuality, sex and gender has been central to Butler’s critique of the ways in which both heterosexuality and categories of sex and gender are naturalized. As Butler states;

Gender can denote a unity of experience, of sex, gender, and desire, only when sex can be understood in some sense to necessitate gender—where gender is a psychic and/or cultural designation of the self—and desire—where desire is heterosexual and therefore differentiates itself through an oppositional relation to that other gender it desires. The internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 30).

This mutual constitution of compulsory heterosexuality and sexual and gendered difference means that men’s homosexuality must be addressed in relation to how it complicates and problematizes their gendered identification within an Egyptian framework of gender. Some of the context-specific challenges faced by informants due to their homosexuality will be sketched out briefly in one of the following sections but it is important to note at this juncture the interconnectedness of sexuality and gender. In an approach similar to and following from Foucault, Butler’s critique of the heterosexual matrix and the attending necessity of a binary system of sex/gender seeks to demystify the apparent naturalness of sexual categories. In addition to Butler’s insights into the inculcation of a compulsory heterosexuality into our constitution as subjects and her critique of sex/gender difference Butler’s work is vital for our understanding of sexuality and gender because of its focus on performativity. Butler seeks to interrogate the relationship between and interconnectedness of the

discursive/ideological plane and that of social action and praxis. “Butler argues that gender is a kind of enforced cultural performance, compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, and that, as such, it is performative. Rather than expressing some inner core or pre-given identity, the performance of gender produces the *illusion* of such a core...”(Jagger 2008: 21). The premise of the argument is that the apparent naturalness of the discursive constructs of sex/gender is created, invested and continually re-invested with force through the iteration of acts and practices that constitute those constructs. What Butler’s theorization crucially does is bring action and performance into our analysis of discursive constructs and with such a move it also opens up possibilities for transformation and change through action. This is vital to my research because even as discursive categories such as ‘gay’ are being adopted they take on a locally inscribed form of action that I would argue destabilizes the hegemony of such categories as well as the Egyptian sex/gender binarism. As I will show however, the interaction between the praxis of gay men and Egyptian gender ideals is not merely one of complete subversion but one where there is constant negotiation. It is vital to underscore that there can be a great deal of contestation in the process of negotiation, particularly as chapter six (on camp and performance) will demonstrate. As butler writes of the category of woman, ““...if there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end, As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification” (Butler 1990:45). Butler, rather crucially highlights the temporal and processual character of gender performance and the fissures and opportunities for subversion and transformation that such a processual nature allows. Her thoughts and arguments regarding the importance of performance to our understanding of the ways in which discursive categories operate and are inscribed into action is central to the arguments made in this thesis regarding categories and their transformation.

### **The Scene and Queer ‘Subcultures’**

In this thesis I do not wish to make general claims about men-who-have-sex-with-men or even men who identify as gay, my research was specifically focused

on men who not only identified as such but who considered themselves and were considered by others as members of a gay-specific social scene<sup>9</sup>. As such, this thesis is about the social articulation of not only a homosexual ‘identity’ but the social articulation of a collectivity beyond the acts of actual sexual intercourse. Sexual attraction and acts underlie the existence of the scene since it is a shared sexual attraction that brings my informants together. The thesis mostly attempts to uncover how ‘the scene’ operates as a social collectivity whilst recognizing how sexual attraction, desire and behavior underpin its actual existence. As well as explore how (while using global gay reference points) they are essentially transforming such references in their efforts to produce and continually cultivate a specifically ‘Egyptian gay scene’ and one that has to deal with a locally constructed sense of precariousness.

The research into the ‘social life of sexuality’ and sexual subcultures was spurred on by the interest of sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s in moving away and expanding beyond the psychological and individualistic approaches of psychoanalysis to questions of sexuality and deviance. As Rubin writes, “the assumptions, questions, and implications of this body of work challenged those of psychiatry, displacing interest in the etiologies of individual disorders with the curiosity about the institutional structures and socialization mechanisms of deviant subcultures” (Rubin 2002: 22). Among those hugely influential in shifting research perspectives from a psychoanalytic view and questions of etiology in relation to homosexuality and sexuality more generally are John Gagnon and William Simon, As Gagnon comments, their work “...was an attempt to bring the field of sexuality under the control of a sociological orientation. The novelty of what we did then was to lay a sociological claim to an aspect of social life that seemed determined by biology or psychology...The research project on gay men...began with a distrust of etiological theories and a vision of sexual lives as determined by social factors” (Quoted in Rubin 2002:28). Gagnon and Simon rejected the then narrow focus of research with regards to homosexuality (the search for etiologies) and argued instead that

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<sup>9</sup> This thesis deals exclusively with the male homosexual scene in Cairo and there was almost no interaction between the gay male scene and the lesbian scene and as a result the thesis does not cover or deal with matters relating to the lesbian scene.



sexuality should not be viewed through an individualistic, psychological lens but through social one since internal psychic states are operate in relation to an external sociality. Gagnon and Simon introduced the notion of scripts to explain how sexuality was still managed by and operated through social conventions and that we learn what is sexual socially. As Gagnon and Simon write, “The term ‘script’ might properly be invoked to describe virtually all human behavior in the sense that there is very little that can in full measure be called spontaneous” (Gagnon and Simon 2005: 12). Consequently, they argue that sexuality and sexual behavior should be addressed in a similar fashion whereby they are facilitated through learned social scripts. They go on to explain that “One can easily conceive of numerous social situations in which all or almost all of the ingredients of a sexual event are present but that remain nonsexual in that not even sexual arousal occurs. Thus, combining such elements as desire, privacy, and a physically attractive person of the appropriate sex, the probability of something sexual happening will, under normal circumstances, remain exceedingly small until either one or both actors organize these behaviors into an appropriate script” (Gagnon and Simon 2002: 13). What Gagnon and Simon did was to bring the social and the sexual together in order to understand shift research attention from etiology to how sexuality is actually enacted and created socially.

This thesis is an attempt to focus primarily on the social aspect of men’s sexualities, on the scene as a social entity and how men become socialized into its ways. In his book *How to Be Gay*, David Halperin writes how the course he taught (bearing the same title as the book) studied “...how men who already are gay acquire a conscious identity, a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, a shared sense of self, an awareness of belonging to a specific social group, and a distinctive sensibility or subjectivity” (Halperin 2012: 13). This thesis is a similar project to understand how scene specific sociality and culture are produced and maintained. It approaches homosexuality on the scene as Halperin does “...as a social rather than an individual condition and as cultural practice rather than a sexual one” (Halperin 2012: 13). This thesis is therefore an ethnographic examination of the ways in which a scene-specific social condition comes about and what forms it takes in the Cairene context.

This is particularly important since, in contrast with other geographical and regional areas (such as Southeast Asia and Latin America), there seems to be a lack of similar ethnographic research on contemporary gay subcultures in the Arab world. While there is a growing academic literature on same-sex sexuality in the Middle East, much of it is limited to historical examination of homosexual practices<sup>10</sup> rather than contemporary sexual subcultures or communities (with the notable exception of two ethnographic dissertations on homosexuality in Beirut, Chahine 2009 and Merabet 2009). Historical examinations that searched for or dealt with finding evidence for the existence of such practices in the region and more journalistic-style attempts at an insight into LGBT and queer experiences in the Arab and Muslim world through the individual narratives (Murray S.O. 1997a, Murray S. O. 1997b, Murray S. O. and Roscoe 1997, Rowson 2008, Schmidtke 1999, Whitaker 2006). While such publications are important to our understanding of the historical development of non-heteronormative sexualities, they present portrayals of same-sex practices that are not entirely relevant to the contemporary lives of gay men in the region. For example, Rowson's investigation of homosexual behaviour among Mamluk elites in Medieval Egypt and Syria presents a social environment that is arguably much more tolerant and accommodating of those practices than modern day Egypt or Syria (Rowson 2008).

### **The Egyptian Context of Research**

The Egypt of 2013 seems miles removed from the Egypt of 2009 when I began fieldwork. After thirty years of near complete political and social stagnation the last three years have seen the ousting of Mubarak's dictatorial regime, a year in a state of emergency under military rule, the election of the first freely elected Egyptian president, President Mohamed Morsi, and the ousting of said president a year later following another wave of public protest. My ethnographic research had, for the most part, preceded this wave of historical developments and

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<sup>10</sup> See Murray S.O. 1997a, Murray S.O. 1997b, Murray S.O. and Roscoe 1997, Rowson 2008, Schmidtke 1999.

consequently, the contextual sketch provided in this section deals mainly with macro-level forces that had shaped the Egyptian research context up until 2011.

El-Kholy identifies three macro-level forces that have slowly shaped Egypt and the fieldwork context over the past six decades<sup>11</sup>. The three forces identified by El-Kholy are those of “...regional migration, ‘open door’ state policies...and the increasing influence of ‘Islamist discourse’” (El-Kholy 2002: 32)<sup>12</sup>. In terms of those macro-level forces outlined by El-Kholy, those of Sadat’s ‘open door’ economic policies and the resurgence of Islamist discourse are perhaps the most pertinent to this thesis. The first by virtue of its centrality to Egypt’s modern era of neoliberal transformation (which in turn has drastically altered and shaped the Egyptian class structure) and the second for its centrality to prevalent understandings of morality and propriety.

The ‘open door’ economic policies initiated by President Anwar Sadat in the 1970s, or ‘*infitah*’ as it is referred to, have had a tremendous impact on Egypt’s economic development and prevalent ideas regarding socioeconomics and consumption (Ghannam 2002: 29). ‘*Infitah*’ was an active shift away from the socialist ideologies that had propelled economic policies since the 1952 socialist coup; open-door policies were used to promote private investment and to attract foreign and Arab capital (Dessouki 1982, Ibrahim 1982). Nasser’s socialist agenda was able to promote and achieve a certain degree of social mobility that was not possible in Egypt prior to 1952. In the post-1952 era the Egyptian ‘middle class’ reigned supreme in the national imaginary with the

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<sup>11</sup> The forces outlined by El-Kholy are present in almost all anthropological accounts of Egypt (El Guindi 1981; Early 1993; Fernea 2002; Ghannam 2002; Hirschkind 2006; Hoodfar 1996; MacLeod 1996; Mahmood 2005; Morsy 1988, Wikan 1980).

<sup>12</sup> While the question of migration is not central to the arguments developed in this thesis it is worth noting that Egypt has experienced one of the highest rates of urbanization worldwide with the percentage of the total population residing in urban areas reaching 44 percent in 1986 (El-Kholy 2002). This high and unregulated rate of urbanization resulted in a dramatic increase in Cairo’s population over the past few decades and has driven the creation and expansion of ‘unofficial’ settlements in the city. Furthermore, Egypt has experienced a high level of regional migration, primarily to rich Gulf states; this type of migration is different from the aforementioned form of internal migration because it involved the temporary migration of Egyptian men while internal rural to urban migration was undertaken with a view to resettlement in an urban center (Hoodfar 1996). The migration of Egyptian men to neighbouring Gulf states leaving their families behind has had significant effects on the family as a social unit, gender roles and the operation of informal social networks since women were given an unprecedented level of authority in household decision-making.

democratization of education, the introduction of state welfare services and a nationalist ideology aimed at signaling the shift to a new Egypt. However, it is important to note, as de Koning does that “The Nasser era also created its own class hierarchies” (de Koning 2009).

With the advancement of the neoliberal agenda we saw the withdrawal of the once powerful image of the Egyptian middle class. The emergence of *Infitah* was the precursor to the 1990s economic structural adjustment policies which, through rigorous promotion of the private sector and the privatization of national enterprises, have greatly altered and shaped income distribution and have contributed to the now vastly polarized Egyptian class structure (Kienle 2002, Mitchell 2002). The IMF/ World Bank backed structural adjustment policies “...included financial austerity measures, a depreciation of the exchange rate, elimination of price controls and subsidies, and public sector reforms and privatization” (de Koning 2009: 22). The ever widening disparity in socioeconomics resulting from those economic transformations have produced an urban milieu where extreme levels of poverty are juxtaposed against extreme levels of wealth but where the widening class disparity is threatening to produce a much more segregated urban space. The recent development of exclusive spaces in the city (such as malls and gated communities) is an indication that this process is threatening to create urban class enclaves where access is restricted to those of a particular class/social standing<sup>13</sup>.

Another macro-level force that bears further consideration is the resurgence in Islamist discourse. The Islamic movement in Egypt has played a significant role in the development of ideas regarding gender, morality and political participation. El Guindi explains that there were two distinct movements of religious revival, the first being a general religious revival and the second a

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<sup>13</sup> Kuppinger describes how “Cairo’s entry into the 21<sup>st</sup> century has been marked by the unprecedented mushrooming of exclusive privatized public spaces, such as shopping malls, upscale hotels, private clubs, and luxury and gated residential communities” (Kuppinger 2004: 35). Also see Denis 2006. This view of Cairo can be juxtaposed against other accounts that describe the city’s spatial class fluidity; for example, Early explains how intensive internal migration had resulted in the breakdown of barriers between *afrangi* and *baladi* quarters of Cairo in the 1970s (Early 1993).

specific Islamic revival (El Guindi 1981)<sup>14</sup>. President Sadat supported the Islamic movement that gained momentum in the 1970s in an attempt to fend off leftist opposition during the period of economic reform and liberalization. Sadat strove to promote an agenda for development that wed progress with the maintenance of Islamic and Egyptian traditions (El-Kholy 2002). It is quite significant that the new Islamist movement placed ideas regarding gender relations and family matters at the heart of its socio-political agenda (El-Kholy 2002: 42).

The Egyptian public sphere and understandings regarding public morality and religious observance have been greatly shaped and altered over the course of the last century by the Islamic Revival (*al-sahwa al-Islamiyya*). This umbrella term is used to refer to a movement comprising a wide range of activities and covering multiple discourses as well as encompassing various interest groups that has, at its roots, relied on a commitment to the revitalization of Islamic morality and pedagogy and the integration of specifically Islamic modes of piety and comportment into day-to-day sociality. “For those who participate in the movement, the moral and political direction of contemporary Muslim societies cannot be left to politicians, religious scholars, or militant activists but must be decided upon and enacted collectively by ordinary Muslims in the course of their normal daily activities” (Hirschkind 2006: 2). This movement’s understandings of public decency, morality and desired forms of Islamic sociability is precisely what my informants were referring to in their discussions of religion; they were referring to the manner in which various discourses relating to the notion of Islamic Revival demanded a shift of responsibility for the Islamic public good from centralized centers of authority to an embodied social collective. Rather importantly, my informants were keenly aware of the fact that such an imagination of the Muslim social collective not only excluded them but demanded a collective rejection of their ‘deviant ways’.

Islamic doctrine is one of the primary ways in which understandings about gender and morality are bound together. Mahmood explains how ‘Islamic

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<sup>14</sup> “The general religious revival can be shown to be a direct response to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The Islamic Movement is a later and more complex development which, although similarly begun after an Arab-Israeli War (the 1973 Ramadan War), was not a direct response to it” (El Guindi 1981: 468).

social conservatism' has permeated many areas of Egyptians' day-to-day lives (Mahmood 2005). The proliferation of cassette sermons, televised religious programs and printed religious materials has resulted in an increase of religious knowledge among Egyptian Muslims. While this process has allowed some room for deliberation and debate regarding aspects of one's religiosity that had earlier been observed unreflectively, they have also contributed to the general state of social conservatism which tightly controls appropriate gender and sexual behaviour (Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005).

The general, public opposition and disapproval of homosexual behavior is primarily fuelled by dominant religious view regarding sexuality and morality. The subversiveness of male homosexual conduct seems to invest those men with the ability to destroy Egyptian morality and, therefore, is perceived as a threat similar to the one posed by unharnessed and uncontrolled female sexuality. The Egyptian government employed a language of moral cleansing in order to describe and legitimate the arrests by the Cairo Vice Squad in 2001 and media coverage stressed the dangers of homosexuality to the country's moral fabric (Bahgat 2001)<sup>15</sup>.

Despite recent attempts at queer readings (Kugle 2003) of Islamic texts, all mainstream readings and interpretations of the Quran and hadith prohibit any form of same-sex sexual relations and, furthermore, any and all forms of sexual relations outside the proscribed bounds marriage are prohibited. Ali writes that homosexuality appears on "...lists of major sins, or enormities (*kaba'ir*), compiled by medieval Muslim scholars. Sometimes ranked in order of importance, at other times listed thematically, the entries combine theological and social sins. Sexual offenses frequently occupy prominent places in these compilations, though always below the gravest sin of associating others with God (*shirk*) and often below the sin of disrespectfulness toward one's parents" (Ali 2006: 75). The prohibition against same-sex sexuality renders it in the public imaginary as one of the most severe of sins and as such places homosexuality and the scenes within which I conducted research outside the bounds of accepted

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<sup>15</sup> The charge of *fujur* (debauchery) employs the language of morality.

religiosity and morality. While this thesis does not address questions of faith or religion explicitly the general resurgence in Islamic discourse was felt by my informants as a social pressure to be reckoned with and one that deepened their sense of alienation from wider social structures.

### **Masculinity and Kinship in Egypt**

The interconnectedness of sexuality and gender addressed earlier means that the structure of Egyptian gender relations is central to men's experiences with their sexuality and as such deserves to be addressed in this contextual introduction. In one of the few and recent contributions towards the study of Arab masculinities *Live and Die Like a Man*, Ghannam seeks to counter what she terms as "...the 'over-embodiment,' especially in Western media, of the women and 'disembodiment,' both in the media and scholarly work, of the men of the Middle East" (Ghannam 2013: 4). Ghannam argues that there has been an overuse of a hegemonic conceptualization of Arab masculinity which (in contrast with similar work on Arab femininity) does not take into consideration the affective, subjective and embodied nature of said masculinity. In order to address this analytical oversight Ghannam proposes the concept of 'masculine trajectories' which she argues "...are characterized by contradictory, dynamic states: achievements and failures, stability and fluidity, clarity and ambiguity, coherence and contradiction, recognition and misrecognition" (Ghannam 2013: 7). Through such an approach Ghannam hopes to attend to the true complexity intrinsic to the cultivation of masculinity which could involve one general path but is nonetheless fraught with tension and uncertainty. What is perhaps most central for my informants with regards to such a conceptualization of masculinity and masculine trajectories is the way in which the terms are used (and I believe rightly so) "...above all...to depict a continuous quest for a sense of (illusive) coherence that has to be cultivated and sustained in different spatial and temporal contexts to garner the social recognition central to the verification of one's standing as a real man" <sup>16</sup> (Ghannam 2013: 7). Ghannam points to the centrality

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<sup>16</sup> Ghannam emphasizes how biological sexual difference is understood as social fact and so the risk to masculinity is considered one of 'failed masculinity' or 'bad masculinity'.

of others in the constitution of one's masculinity as well as to the shifting character of gender expectations. As she rightly points out, in the Egyptian context the cultivation of masculinity is at once a personal and collective endeavor (involving women as much as men) and there is an age-related shifting and transformation of expectations or the emphasis placed on particular capacities and capabilities that are associated with masculinity. For example, Ghannam explores how during the period of adolescence a capacity or capability associated with masculinity is the mastering of the cityscape and so young men are given a great degree of freedom to move and congregate but as they reach marriage age the expectation becomes that they will 'settle down' and greater emphasis is placed on their abilities as providers for their families. This shifting character of expectations was one that troubled my informants since 'proper masculinity' as one aged became integrally connected to and tied with their ability to marry and provide for their families. This situation is further exacerbated by the general view that, while women can remain single out of necessity, men choose to stay single. This particular aspect of shifting expectations may be one of the primary reasons for the appearance of an age-structured cohort effect among my informants. While it was never articulated as such, the apparent absence of large numbers of older gay men may be related to the unacceptability of the 'care-free' lifestyle that is associated with the scene for men past their late twenties or early thirties.

Homosexuality, as can be expected, is almost completely debilitating within normative Egyptian understandings of masculinity. *Khawal*, a commonly used insult (roughly translatable to faggot), is an emasculating term that, while not always referencing actual sexual intercourse is nevertheless used "...in daily life to depict a certain incompetence and an inability to materialize specific social norms in the right context" (Ghannam 2013: 55). The ubiquity of the term and the force with which it is used highlights how insulting and crippling a charge of 'failed' or 'improper' masculinity can be. For my informants the period following their realization of their homosexuality was fraught with insecurity and travails regarding their masculinity but by the time I met most of them on the scene their insecurities regarding their standing as men was not framed in terms of the personal or psychological but related to the social aspect of gendering



pointed to by Ghannam. While they explored and played around with gender subversion on the scene (as will be discussed in chapter six) they still struggled with their masculinities in their extra-scene relationships, particularly with kin, colleagues and acquaintances. So fear of being exposed as a homosexual became, for many of them, a fear of being exposed to the gaze of others as not only deviant and immoral but un-masculine as well. As mentioned earlier, one of the most troubling issues for my informants was the felt need to marry in order to appear to others to be progressing along an accepted and normative masculine trajectory.

The importance accorded to marriage points rather crucially to the necessary imbrication of gender ideals with Egyptian kinship structures; the interrelatedness of personal trajectories with familial ones is an aspect of Egyptian (and Arab) kinship structure that has been addressed by various academics. Suad Joseph's (1999) notion of 'patriarchal connectivity' is useful to bring up here in order to further elaborate on this form of interconnectedness and to reiterate the importance of others (and more specifically kin) in the 'selving' of persons (which necessarily includes gendering). The use of the notion of connectivity highlights the relatedness central to familial relationships in Egypt; the understanding that one is not entirely bounded or separate from others but that one is and is always in a process of becoming within those networks of connections and relations. Joseph uses 'patriarchal connectivity' "...to mean the production of selves with fluid boundaries organized for gendered and aged domination in a culture valorizing kin structures, morality and idioms" whereby "...kin structures...refer to the institutional arrangements that provide the rules of relationships by which kinship is governed..." and where morality references "...the values shaping the beliefs and guiding the behavior of members of the society" (Joseph 1999: 12). So the struggles my informants faced with their masculinities must always be related to and positioned against this connective backdrop where a failure to enact and continually perform along a normative trajectory is or can be seen as much a 'collective failure' for those in one's kin network as it is for the particular person involved (this is explored in more detail in chapter two).

These were pressures, worries and struggles that my informants had to contend with to varying degrees but almost always on an on-going basis; their lives and experiences with the scene unfolded against this near-constant backdrop. While I want to avoid an essentializing approach that would identify specific techniques that men used to deal with such pressures, they nonetheless negotiated this terrain by appealing to the unstable and fluid nature of masculine identification described by Ghannam. As Ghannam writes “A masculine identification is not fixed, complete, or fully established but has to be re-created and reasserted in different settings. It is always under the gaze of others, who may challenge, reaffirm, legitimize, or discredit its durability and ‘authenticity’” (Ghannam 2013: 32). So even as a failure (such as the refusal to marry) may present a challenge to men, ‘real men’ are expected to display certain character ideals at various moments and in different dealings with others, such as *gad‘ana* (a term used to denote various positive qualities such as valor, trustworthiness, standing up for justice and so forth). As Ghannam points out, such ideals, while predominantly used in reference to men, can and are at times used in reference to women who display such characteristics and so, while traditionally gendered they are in fact somewhat more flexibly applied in day-to-day interactions. Appealing to such ideals allows men’s masculinity to be in some sense acknowledged and allows them to relate to what can appear as dominant, normative understandings of masculinity. That said, however, such appeals’ success is still for the most part contingent upon their homosexuality remaining hidden. I would like to reiterate and stress however that such preoccupations with masculinity is largely in relation to extra-scene relationships and, as will be highlighted through later discussions of camp, on the scene a subversion of normative gendered disposition was valorized and celebrated.

While in no way exhaustive, this section has attempted to highlight the imbrication and interconnectedness of masculinity, sexuality and kinship for my informants and some of the ways in which dominant Egyptian understandings complicate and trouble men’s experiences.

## Scene Context: Fieldsite

This thesis is based on eighteen months of ethnographic research on Cairo's gay scenes<sup>17</sup> conducted between the winter of 2009 and the spring of 2011. Before venturing any further I must elaborate on the structure of the Cairene gay 'community' and its internal divisions and where I position my research in relation to such divisions. As stated earlier, when I arrived in Cairo to begin fieldwork I was told time and time again by informants that there was no such thing as a 'community' *per se* and they spoke instead of gay scenes that were fragmented and separated along class lines. As the previous section on the Cairene and Egyptian contexts of this research has stated, class forces permeate almost all aspects of Egyptian social life and the 'gay world' was no exception nor was it exempt from the machinations of such forces. My research was conducted mostly with men from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds. While men occasionally spoke of a 'community' in an abstract sense, they more regularly spoke of a gay scene or scenes. My mostly upper and upper-middle class informants used the term 'community' to refer to both their own scene as well as what they referred to as 'the downtown scene' of middle and lower-middle class men. When they spoke of 'the scene' they would, on most but not all occasions, be speaking with their own class specific scene in mind. However, to complicate matters a little further my informants also sometimes used the singular term 'gay scene' to refer to both scenes. There was no particular pattern for their choice of one term over another and the labels seemed fluid in their application in conversations but for the purposes of the research I will specify whenever necessary which scene I am to be writing about. While I did conduct some research on the downtown scene, the majority of my ethnographic material is derived from my interactions and research relationships on the upper and upper-middle class scene.

The reason I found myself operating primarily in this pool of social relations was in many ways due to an earlier project I had conducted with gay

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<sup>17</sup> While I did on occasion meet men who were gay but did not participate in the scene or its activities and only made appearances at one or two parties this thesis is primarily focused on men who considered their network of social relations on the scene to be one of their primary social scenes.

men as an undergraduate at the American University of Cairo (AUC). That research project was based on in-depth interviews with three Egyptian gay men. Only one of them, Ess, had been ‘on the scene’<sup>18</sup> at the time and he became my first entry point into the scene when I returned for fieldwork in 2009. At the time of the research project in the winter of 2005 I had not fully realized or understood the parameters of what those men referred to as ‘the scene’ and had somewhat erroneously understood them to be speaking of a wider net of social relations that perhaps traversed and crossed class lines. At the time, class divisions as they were related to me did not appear as severe as I would come to learn they in fact were. This was largely due to the fact that they were essentially speaking of a class-specific scene during interviews and almost never spoke of a ‘downtown scene’ at the time. Furthermore, this preliminary research project was not animated by the same sorts of questions regarding collectivity and groupness that I am most interested in addressing in this thesis. When I returned to Cairo in 2009 Ess introduced me to his contacts in the scene just as he was withdrawing from scene social life and it was, as I was building contacts and relationships on this particular class-inflected scene, that I learned of the existence of the ‘downtown scene’. Because of the effort and time I spent building contacts and participating in the scene that was my initial entry point into gay social life in Cairo that became my primary ‘fieldsite’ while the ‘downtown scene’ became a secondary one of sorts.

It is now important that I sketch out what I mean by upper and upper-middle class to provide an overview of informants’ backgrounds and, by extension, a better understanding of the social make up of my ‘primary fieldsite’. I use the terms upper and upper-middle class mostly as folk categories since those were the labels and terms most used by my informants. However, one or two of my informants from that scene referred to themselves as ‘middle class’ or, in some cases, ‘very middle class’ in descriptive terms. The problem with such categorizations is due to the greatly shifting understandings of class in Egypt over the second half of the twentieth century (as highlighted in the previous

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<sup>18</sup> I use the term ‘on the scene’ to refer specifically to men who participated regularly on the scene. That is, it refers to men who considered their friendships and relationships on the scene to be one of their primary networks of social relations.

section). My informants shared a general background with de Koning's Cairene informants in her ethnography on class, cosmopolitanism and gender in Cairo, where she uses the term upper-middle class to highlight

“the significant differences from professionals of other middle class strata in terms of income, lifestyle, and social worlds. What most clearly sets these upper-middle class professionals apart from other middle class professionals is...‘cosmopolitan capital’: familiarity with globally dominant...repertoires and standards—for example, fluency in English—as well as the ability to participate in conspicuously cosmopolitan lifestyles that have become the prerogative of Cairo's upper-middle class and elites” (de Koning 2009: 6).

My informants shared those same general characteristics as de Koning's and were mostly students or professionals working at multinational companies, national and international banks, small and medium sized businesses and a couple were self-employed designers. What de-Koning terms ‘cosmopolitan consumption’ is important for my ethnographic study since it, in many ways, affected the spaces where men met and gathered hence, the spaces and settings where my research was conducted.

### **Research Spaces for Participant Observation and Other Methods of Fieldwork**

Similar to de Koning's fieldwork experience, many of my interactions with informants took place at coffee shops and restaurants. Such spaces, vital to the framing of de Koning's work on cosmopolitan consumption, were a regular feature of my informants' social worlds. De Koning rightly identifies the proliferation and centrality of such eateries and coffee shops to the consumption patterns of the Egyptian upper and upper-middle classes in a neoliberal era (de Koning 2006; de Koning 2009). My ethnographic material relies heavily upon such interactions and get-togethers which usually took place in small groups. I

was interested in capturing as much of the scene interaction dynamics as possible and so I took detailed notes of all conversations during such gatherings and outings and paid particular attention to gestures, intonation and performance styles. Later into fieldwork and after asking my informants for consent I would also record those conversations. In addition to such gatherings, similar small get-togethers at homes were equally important sites of research; such gatherings, as would be expected, provided a much greater level of intimacy and therefore provided the spaces necessary for me to get to know particular groups of informants well.

Two research spaces or contexts that were of an entirely different character from such meetings and get-togethers were large scene parties, such as the ones referenced at the beginning of this introduction, and the support group meetings held at Malek and John's apartment in the winter and spring of 2010. Both these contexts were of a very different tenor from the gatherings described earlier. In terms of the parties, those were especially important settings for two main reasons, firstly, they were vital for meeting informants who were on the scene but were not nonetheless part of my immediate circle of close informants and friends. Secondly, they were such crucial spaces for the scene's sense of groupness, a sense of coming-together. The ethnographic material derived from such boisterous encounters was crucial in understanding the ways in which the structure of the scene operated (as will become apparent through the discussion in chapter three) since those spaces were the ones where scene-building efforts were most explicit and apparent, they were also the spaces where the drawing of boundaries between the upper and upper-middle class scene and the downtown scene was equally at its most evident.

Finally, the support group meeting setting was of yet another character; those meetings were the only instances when men attempted to come together in an organized manner. Despite the fact that a great deal of time was devoted to figuring out exactly what the men assemble hoped to accomplish through the meetings, the still offered an alternative space where issues relating to political activism and community mobilization were discussed in a sustained manner. As

the resident anthropologist I was charged with keeping notes of those meetings. As I took down minute meetings I was also able to take detailed fieldnotes.

In addition to those research sites I recorded in-depth interviews with my informants and conducted other, shorter unstructured interviews. As stated earlier, I found myself working closely with this particular pool of informants due to an earlier project and the contacts I had made during that period of fieldwork, I was then introduced to more informants as I integrated myself into the scene. The first few months of research I relied most heavily on participant observation and focused my attentions on mapping and understanding the topics or areas of discussion that could then be addressed more concertedly in interviews. I then devised two types of interviews, one that resembled life history interviews and another that dealt more specifically with particular areas or topics that I had gleaned were of special importance to my informants and the scene at large (such as family and marriage, religion<sup>19</sup>, scene structure, class relations and so forth). I reserved the life history interviews for six of my closest informants, since I felt that I could integrate materials derived from such interviews more effectively into what I had already learned and was continuing to observe and learn through my close interactions with them. I used a shorter form of life history interviews with another handful of informants. I conducted topic and area-specific interviews with a wider pool of my informants, those who were acquaintances and whom I had gotten to know quite well but did not necessarily interact with as regularly or as closely. Furthermore, I made efforts to meet men who were on the periphery of the scene, dipping in for occasional events or gatherings or those who were just tentatively coming onto the scene but who did not consider themselves 'part of the scene' yet. This was particularly important for understanding how men began interacting with the scene and how those who considered themselves somewhat removed from the scene viewed its sociality and interactions (for example, this was how I learned that those on the periphery or just coming onto the scene were most likely to feel uneasy about the use of camp). Since I had relatively very little previous contact with those men (or

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<sup>19</sup> As stated earlier however, interviews considering questions of religion were the most difficult to conduct and the ones men most hesitant about engaging with and so materials drawn from such interviews were very minimal.

almost no previous contact with those men, as is the case with man I had met online) those interviews were more general combining personal life history questions with ones relating to their views of the scene and were not recorded.

### **Doing Anthropology at Home**

When I first arrived in Cairo in 2009 to begin research I was returning ‘home’. I was returning to the city where I had grown up and lived up until two years before fieldwork. Considering the fact that I was an Egyptian gay man myself, my subject position or positionality in relation to the fieldwork experience bears extended engagement. In many ways I was doing fieldwork as an ‘insider’ at home but, as many anthropologists have argued, the insider/outsider dichotomy must be problematized (Abu-Lughod 1991, Naples 2003, Narayan 1993, Twine 2000). Voloder writes, “In contrast to the classic model of anthropological research, which defines the ethnographic endeavor in terms of clear movements in and out of the field...research at home is characterized by the increased proximity and intersection between ‘home’, the sites of the familiar, the personal and of non-research activities and ‘field’, the sites of the unfamiliar, the professional and research activities” (Voloder 2008: 30). My fieldwork did involve a clash of some sorts between my personal life before the period of fieldwork and my life as an ethnographer during fieldwork.

What is perhaps more problematic in the definition of my position in binary terms is the context of ‘the scene’ as a fieldsite. While as a native Cairene and Egyptian I was a ‘cultural insider’, in scene terms I was still an outsider at the beginning of research since I had never been on the scene per se. That said however, my transformation from scene-outsider to scene-insider mirrored that of my informants; I became integrated into the scene, as most of my informants had, gradually and through a cultivation of social relationships with men on the scene and the attendance of scene gatherings and parties. While my efforts at becoming part of the scene were perhaps more concerted than other gay men’s, our paths into scene sociality were almost identical. Despite introducing myself (and later being introduced) as an anthropologist conducting research on the scene, I was for the most part integrated as yet another gay man. The way I



learned, ‘was taught’ and was socialized into the ways of Cairo’s ‘gay world’ similarly mirrored my informants’ own learning processes as they slowly became part of the scene. Such processes and my experiences of integration cemented in my mind my arguments regarding a scene-specific sociality and ‘subculture’. This transformation from outsider to insider underscored the importance of seeing, examining and analyzing the scene as a collectivity but it also problematized the dichotomous insider/outsider view of the field since I was both insider and outsider.

There were some clear advantages to my position as a ‘cultural insider’, the fact that I was not only a fluent Arabic speaker but that my mother tongue was spoken, colloquial Egyptian Arabic aided the initial period of fieldwork. Nevertheless, my position as ‘cultural insider’ presented challenges as well; it was exceedingly difficult to elicit detailed information from my informants about matters that they thought should have been self-evident to another Egyptian. For example, eliciting precise information about how class difference was perceived was such an area; men were at times annoyed by my insistent questioning about class matters and kept invoking the statement ‘you know what I mean’ as opposed to delving into greater detail as they would have perhaps done had they been speaking to a complete outsider.

Perhaps what is of most significance to this thesis in relation to my positionality is my ‘closeness’ to the material being presented and the research project more generally. While my deeply personal involvement with the topic and questions being asked in this thesis fuelled my passion for the project it has not been without its challenges. I had, perhaps somewhat naively, underestimated the extent to which working on matters that were so ‘close to home’ would be challenging. In particular, the fact that my sexuality was causing many problems with my family both during the period of fieldwork and during the writing-up process amplified that sense of challenge due to the convergence of my personal life and research. Nevertheless, I believe that during fieldwork it was that convergence that greatly benefited my ability to build relationships with my informants more quickly. In one sense, my informants felt that, as an Egyptian myself, we would be contending with the same general pressures and risks with

regards to our sexuality and our presence on the scene. For example, during one of my very first meetings with Malek he asked me if I held dual citizenship or held passports other than my Egyptian one. This was at a time before post-2011 xenophobic rhetoric had taken hold in public and political discourse and at a time when the general perception was that the Egyptian state would avoid unnecessary diplomatic confrontations and would show a degree of leniency with foreigners or Egyptians holding dual citizenship if it were to come to blows with the scene. Upon hearing that I only held the one nationality and one passport Malek joked that ‘we are in the same boat’.

Even more particularly, this sense of affinity was further bolstered by the pressures I was facing from my family. I was actually the advice I received in relation to my family and how I should deal with them that helped me gain further insight into the topics of discussion in chapter two. For example, when I came under intense pressure from my family to get married I was surprised by the number of men who suggested that I should get a ‘for-show marriage’ not only to placate my family but to, in some sense, fulfill a sense of familial duty through my avoidance of the possible pain and hurt it might cause them. Of course I do not mean to say that, had I not been Egyptian, that I would not have been able to arrive at the same general material regarding the centrality of the family or that I would not have been able to build such strong relationships with my informants but I do believe it did help my initial access to the scene and to participate in the scene more easily.

That said however, the most challenging aspect of conducting fieldwork was related to the movement between multiple scenes. While, as stated earlier, there were some rare and infrequent opportunities for the scenes to cross paths they were for the most part separate and so moving between the two proved somewhat difficult. I worried that if I moved between scenes too much that I might glean data from both but might not be included completely in either and so I made the decision to focus my attentions on one scene while making occasional forays into the other.

In terms of challenges I found the writing-up process by far the most taxing aspect of this research and this was largely due to my personal entanglement with the material mentioned earlier. As explicated, while closeness to the subject matter of the research and my standing as an Egyptian gay man did aid in the period of fieldwork and did give me insights into my informants' trials and tribulations it also complicated the process of writing-up. As I attempted to grapple with various questions and issues I found myself in a trying position, writing about matters with which I had deep and intimate connection but ones with which I still felt somewhat removed from due to my position as researcher and anthropologist. As can perhaps be expected the chapter I found most difficult to write was the one relating to kinship and the troubles associated with coming out or disclosure. The reason I found writing the second chapter of this thesis so trying was because the pressures I was attempting to analyze and consider were ones that I not only had first-hand experience of but that I (like many of my informants) felt and grappled with constantly and on a near-daily basis. It was also troubling because I was wary of writing myself into the ethnography or allowing my personal experiences to shift my arguments and analyses whilst still attempting to take advantage of the insight my position accorded me. Throughout the analysis in that particular chapter and the thesis more generally I attempt to strike a balance between the concrete field data and such insights.

Yet another aspect of my positionality that perhaps necessitates serious contemplation is my position as a 'Westernized' Egyptian gay man since it was such a position that prompted such a strong reaction from me with regards to Massad's text and the arguments he makes. Furthermore, it has prompted me to continually reflect upon said reaction and how to proceed analytically. When I first came upon Massad's arguments in the first year of the PhD program I had an almost visceral reaction, as some of my informants did, to his arguments. While I could follow Massad's critique I was somehow confused and troubled by his use of 'Westernized' as a descriptive category since I knew that the term could certainly be used in reference to men such as myself but still found it difficult to fully understand what it meant or what it entailed. Where does the Westernization begin and where does it end? Are there degrees of Westernization? While, as stated earlier, I agree with Massad's critique of gay

rights discourse which attempts to neutralize cross-cultural difference I still felt that his reference to men such as myself (who have taken up the category of gay) somewhat problematic since it did not attend to the complexities and conflicts inherent in such an identification. For example, and as will be discussed in chapter two, attending issues such as coming out and disclosure are complicated by understandings of familial connectivity. Furthermore, such a view downplays the importance such categories play in men's ability to connect with one another (through the scene for example) and the ways in which spaces and networks such as the scene offer support for men struggling with their sexualities. As a result of this complicated relationship to Massad's work I spent a considerable amount of time throughout the writing up process reflecting upon how best to acknowledge the limitations of the 'Gay International' discourse whilst still according appropriate attention to the ways in which my informants related to identity categories and the ways in which such identifications allow men to build support networks such as the scene.

## **Ethics**

The nature of this research project required the careful consideration of questions pertaining to ethics. Primary amongst those concerns was how to protect the identities of my informants and how to conduct research in a place, as stated earlier, where my personal and professional/ethnographic lives collided without inadvertently 'outing' my informants. I used pseudonyms throughout my fieldnotes and as an added precaution I changed each informant's pseudonym two or three times during fieldwork. Pseudonyms have also been used throughout this thesis in an effort to preserve my informants' anonymity. I must note however that three of my key informants and friends Malek, Gigi and Ali had requested that I use their real names but, in an effort to err on the side of caution and after discussing this with them, I used pseudonyms instead of their real names. Moreover, in order to avoid inadvertently outing informants during fieldwork I attempted to remain as vague as possible about my research topic and the men among whom I was conducting research whenever speaking with those outside the scene while I was in Cairo for fieldwork in case our paths were to cross while I was out with my informants.

## **Thesis Outline**

In order to trace the dynamics of instability, ambiguity and uncertainty affecting at play on the scene/s and to juxtapose those against different forms and efforts at scene-building the first three chapters examine various forms of uncertainties and ambiguities while the latter three chapters focus on the cultivation of the scene in spite of those forces. **Chapter one** begins by setting out the scene's precarious situation in relation to the state and the legal treatment of homosexuality. The 2001-2004 crackdown brought the state's criminalization of homosexuality into full relief; it represented a clear break from an earlier period of tacit acknowledgment and, some would argue, acceptance, a period during which the pre-Queen Boat scene had flourished. The chapter argues that this crackdown instigated and greatly shaped the general sense of insecurity and instability that continued to permeate the scene up until and throughout the period of fieldwork. Furthermore, it interrogates how criminalization of homosexuality represents a 'crisis of recognition' and the various ways in which men's 'perceived criminality' leaves them vulnerable.

**Chapter two** shifts the focus to men's relationship with their families and the complications that arose out of their attempts to negotiate between their subject positions within kinship structures (their duties and obligations as brothers, sons, cousins and so forth) and their sexual subjectivities. The chapter takes 'coming out' and the idea of 'self-disclosure' as an analytical entry point into the ways in which men experience and deal with those, mostly conflicting, subject positions. I argue that, far from being a clear binary movement from 'in to out' or from non-disclosure to full-disclosure the 'coming out' process is actually fraught with uncertainties and ambiguities. Furthermore, it raises troubling questions for their futures.

**Chapter three** addresses the community's fragmentation along class lines. I argue that it is precisely such a perceived fragmentation that confounds and problematizes men's ability to see their separate scenes as capable of mounting a political platform for rights. The chapter examines the fissures within the scene,

the ways in which class distinctions play out on the scene and how they come to shape and transform the boundaries drawn to the scenes.

In **chapter four** I begin to examine how, despite those preceding elements of instability and ambiguity, there were concerted efforts to cultivate scene spaces and how those came together to shape a gay urban geography. By focusing on cruising spots and different scene hangouts I examine how men's movement through space allowed them to carve out such a geography and how it was through a persistent sense of presence that they continually inscribed those places with meaning. Nevertheless, the chapter does present how the dynamics of instability and permanence still played out in such processes of place-making.

**Chapter five** and **chapter six** focus on the cultivation of the scene through narratives and scene-specific modes of interaction and performance. The Queen Boat raid and the wider 2001-2004 crackdown has led to the scene being spoken of as ephemeral, transient and unstable, in chapter five I argue that narratives allowed men to create a sense of continuity and historical depth for the scene. During such narratives, the Queen Boat acted as a central reference point where the ability to speak of the scene's development in pre/post terms imbued the scene with a sense of historicity. Furthermore, I explore how the narrative surrounding the emergence of 'gay slang' and the cultural reference points it indexes similarly allowed men to create a sense of continuity and permanence in time. Lastly, I examine how 'the scene' operated as an anchor for men's narrations of their sexualities and how, in turn, men's individual stories and struggles were woven together into a narrative of the scene. **Chapter six** focuses on the 'gay slang' introduced in chapter five and how it was part of wider scene-specific forms of performance and interaction. I argue that the 'camp' element of such performances acted as a form of 'cooperative discourse' that allowed men to create a sense of 'collective identity' through performance. Furthermore, as a practice prevalent among men from both the upper and upper-middle class as well as the downtown scenes, these interactional styles bridged scene divides and underscored a wider sense of collectivity and groupness. Finally, the 'camp' facet of such modes of interaction also offer a form of commentary on wider gendered and heteronormative structures that so often vilify and alienate men.



## CHAPTER ONE

### **A Crisis of Recognition: Criminality, ambiguity, vulnerability and ‘the scene’**

A few weeks before I left Cairo to return to London I found myself sitting in a restaurant with Ali and several other men discussing politics. It had been nearly two months since Egyptians had spilled onto the streets in public protest and nearly a month since those popular protests had brought down the thirty year dictatorial rule of the Mubarak regime. Most of my informants had been amongst the thousands of Cairene’s who had made their way to Tahrir Square in calls for regime change. As we were sitting discussing the changing political scene and what it could mean for the gay scene I had expressed cynical reservations about the potential for a gay rights platform despite the changing political climate. This specific conversation had been prompted by calls on Facebook for a gay rights march similar to the Women’s Day march earlier in the year, a move that most of my informants had vehemently opposed out of fear of the possible backlash it would cause.

Ali exclaimed that while the protests were not about the gay scene or gay rights it was, nonetheless, the first time that Egyptian gay men had felt ‘recognized’ or ‘acknowledged’ as part of the citizenry. He repeated a story I had heard several times since the protests first erupted on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January; one of Ali’s closest friends had been around Tahrir Square after the initial bout of clashes with the authorities and overheard another protester trying to explain to his friends where he was standing around the square and had said that he was standing near ‘*rokn el khawalat*’ (the faggot corner) in reference to the group that Ali’s friend was a part of. Ali then went on to explain that while the man had used the pejorative term ‘*khawalat*’ the directions had been delivered in a matter-of-fact manner and were not meant as an attack on or criticism of the group of men he had labeled ‘*khawalat*’. Ali explained that, while he certainly did not anticipate any changes in attitudes towards gay rights or any form of movement towards legal recognition or protections that nevertheless the 2011 revolution marked a watershed moment for the gay men and their relationships to the state and civil



society. The fact that gay men had gone to the streets as part of wider national collective and the fact that they were accepted as brothers in arms against the regime signaled a promising shift in the recognition of gay men as part of the Egyptian citizenry. I do not want to overstate the drastic nature of the shift in perception since gay men, while visible, did not necessarily push at the time to be recognized as gay men as such but what is most worth noting is the feelings of belonging that this perceived shift in perceptions engendered among my informants. What Ali was speaking about was that, because of the revolution and their involvement in it, gay men felt recognized in some way by society at large and not in terms of criminality or perversion but as equals in a struggle against oppression. This form of tacit recognition is noteworthy precisely because the only time the community had been recognized or acknowledged in any way prior to the revolution was through the events of the Queen Boat.

This chapter explores the precarious position men find themselves in vis-à-vis the state as a result of a legal/'official' discourse that almost never fully elucidates its imaginings of homosexuality/homosexuals. This precariousness translates into an overall sense of uncertainty and instability both on the individual and scene levels in terms of a 'crisis of recognition'. The Egyptian Penal Code's somewhat ambiguous treatment of homosexuality in the provision that is now used to criminalize male same sex practices highlights a crisis in the imaginings of this transgressive, 'criminal' subject. The elusive character of this legal provision and its almost equally as elusory judicial application produce a confusing criminality that leaves men in constant threat of criminality. This chapter will also demonstrate how the public prosecution of gay men and widely accepted understandings of morality and religiosity that reject homosexuality compound this pervasive sense of uncertainty and, more dangerously, are used to justify crimes against gay men.

### **The Criminalization of Homosexuality**

While there are no legal provisions in the Egyptian penal code that explicitly criminalize sexual acts between men, the investigative and judicial traditions have effectively criminalized homosexual relations through a wide-reaching and

overzealous interpretation of article 9(c) of Law 10/1961 first passed in the early 1950s to combat prostitution. This article criminalizes the habitual practice of *dia'ra* and *fujur*. *Dia'ra* is generally and rather un-problematically understood to mean prostitution but the term *fujur*, which the Human Rights Watch report on the Queen Boat Trials translates as ‘debauchery’, seems much more elusive and incorporates notions of lasciviousness and sexual excess (HRW 2004).

*Fujur* was most famously uncoupled from prostitution in a 1975 Cassation Court ruling that stated that no financial transaction need take place for the crime of ‘debauchery’ to be committed (HRW 2004). This ruling was issued in a case where the Cairo vice squad had entered a private residence to find two men engaging in sexual activity and where the passive partner was charged with *fujur*. The accused admitted having sex with multiple men but denied receiving any form of compensation for his sexual activities. The court found that the crime of *fujur* was essentially about the ‘indiscriminate’ satisfaction of the sexual appetites of others and, consequently, compensation was an unnecessary component. According to the ruling, quoted in “In a Time of Torture”;

“The legislator explicitly stated that this crime [the habitual practice of debauchery] happens when one practices vice...with people with no distinction, and when this happens habitually. He did not necessitate for this charge that the practice of debauchery...happens in return for a payment” (HRW 14:2004)

Divorcing *fujur* or ‘debauchery’ from its roots in anti-prostitution measures allowed and continues to allow the police, prosecutors and courts to wield the charge of ‘debauchery’ as an instrument of societal moral control<sup>20</sup>. The public prosecution of gay men in 2001 was heralded as the nation’s quest to purge itself of immoral elements through legislature that draws explicitly on understandings of morality. As stated earlier, the term *fujur* in Arabic refers, not only to the engagement in sexual vices but the commitment of such vices to excess and

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<sup>20</sup> An element of the law that perhaps needs further clarification since it seems rather vague and problematic is the necessity for the habitual practice of debauchery for a guilty verdict. The courts have concluded that the practice be termed habitual if a person has had sex more than once and with more than one partner over a period of three years.

almost implies a celebration of vice and sin. In popular use in Egypt, *fujur* is used to refer to, not only a person's immorality, but their refusal to show any degree of shame as well. The implication being that the flagrant and public disregard for religious and societal mores is a crime all its own. Men's misinformed assumption of criminality is largely dependent on the interconnectedness of and slippages between understandings and expectations of legality and morality. If nothing else, the Queen Boat trials helped engender and cement an inaccurate sense of criminality as well as immorality among men. Men had always assumed their sexuality was 'wrong' in some way (for example, immoral) but the manner in which those trials were conducted and covered by the media concretized the inaccurate understanding that their actions must be illegal and, consequently, they are made to feel like criminals or fugitives in hiding.

Almost none of my informants spoke of the criminalization of homosexuality at social gatherings or parties but would regularly joke about getting arrested. The first party I attended during fieldwork was in a small, raised ground floor flat in one of the many gated communities off the Cairo-Alexandria road. I met up with Malek, who had eagerly invited me to go to the party with him, and three other men by a row of parked cars across from the building and we could already see men milling about in the front yard since the party had spilled out onto the garden surrounding the building. We could hear the dull thuds and faint racket of music as we walked over to the party and I worried that the neighbors might complain or, even worse, call the police. The other men seemed unconcerned however and, as we walked over to the building, joked that it was perhaps a good thing the party was being held on the ground floor since we could easily escape in case of a police raid. This became somewhat of a running joke and a regular icebreaker throughout the night; I would be introduced to someone and they would then jokingly begin laying down various escape routes. These jokes are a fixture of scene gatherings and hangouts. For example, men regularly joked about impending raids on 'The O Bar', a run-down, rooftop bar in downtown Cairo because two tiny, rickety elevators serve as the only access point to this 10<sup>th</sup> floor gay haven and there aren't even any emergency stairs in case of a raid, or a fire for that matter. During those

exchanges men never actually spoke of the legitimacy of such arrests and there was no mention of how a raid on a hangout or a party would not satisfy the criminal components of *fujur* since no sexual acts would have been taking place and investigators would be hard-pressed to provide any evidentiary support for the ‘habituality’ of such undiscovered practices. What these exchanges highlight is an accepted sense of fragility among gay men; men are aware that they are rejected by society and, the il/legality of homosexuality notwithstanding, feel that police and the judiciary would somehow find a way to criminalize any actions pertaining to a sexual orientation deemed religiously and societally abhorrent.

This sense of fragility is bolstered by an assumed and internalized sense of criminality among a large group of gay men that is continuously affirmed by a judicial process that seems hell-bent on criminalizing homosexuality. Because of the near impossibility of gathering incriminating evidence in cases of *fujur* police forces have relied on the manipulation of men’s limited knowledge of the legal intricacies of the law and their full rights. These concerted efforts at misleading men during the period of investigation rely on the to be expected moral outrage of judges to seal homosexuality’s criminality. Interviews and discussions with Adel Ramadan, a lawyer at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)<sup>21</sup>, and a review of Egyptian case law would suggest that judges, driven by their own moral and religious inclinations, relax their need for evidentiary support in cases of *fujur* and are satisfied with proof of homosexuality as a basis for guilt. Judges often feel a religious or moral obligation to punish gay men for their homosexuality even if it involves stretching the interpretation of the law since they believe that the spirit of the law was to protect a societal moral fabric that is jeopardized through the acceptance or tolerance of homosexuality. Public shaming is, as evident in the treatment of the Queen Boat trials, an important component of the state’s punishment regimen and a method of injecting a

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<sup>21</sup> The EIPR is registered as a legal practice but its activities extend far beyond those of a legal practice and it operates as an NGO of sorts running various human and civil rights monitoring programs and social awareness campaigns. It is one of the very few organizations that has incorporated sexual freedom under its rubric of personal rights. The EIPR legal team is also responsible for the defense of many gay men being tried for *fujur*.

pervasive sense of criminality into the lives of gay men<sup>22</sup>. The conflation of morality and legality and the blurring of immorality into understandings of illegality is not an easy straightforward task particularly because of the ambiguous language of the law. Coverage of cases such as the ‘Queen Boat’ trial does not concern itself with the legal and procedural intricacies and, instead, presents an ‘already-condemned’ defendant. The problem here is that the ‘social recognition’ of the ‘criminal homosexual’ that is informed by religious and moral discourse precedes its ‘legal recognition’ and this is where we can locate this ‘crisis of recognition’. The law is then assumed and expected to ‘recognize’ homosexuality’s ‘depravity’ in the same way as it is conceived of popularly and the legal reality is in some ways lost in the process. For example, the fact that judges anticipate and rule according to, in some cases flimsy, evidence of ‘homosexuality’ rather than *fujur* demonstrates the ways in which moral considerations and widely held religious beliefs are inextricably minced into the legal construction of homosexuals. The crisis emerges as homosexuality is subsumed in and consumed by legal machinations that deny its explicit existence in the legislature and is then recognized in the courts. Through the courts’ treatment of cases of *fujur* homosexuality is somehow tangentially recognized as an immoral, and de facto criminalized, sexual act between men despite the fact that the legal provision never states the supposed same-sex nature of *fujur* and that it was initially introduced to combat prostitution. Furthermore, it is important to stress the lack of explicit elaboration of what the criminal act of *fujur* actually entails in the penal code since this has spillover effects into the confusion surrounding homosexuality. The courts have contributed to this uncertainty through their inconsistent evaluation of what actual criminal act actually took place in cases where a defendant or more were found guilty; for example, in the 1975 case mentioned earlier the active partner was a prosecutorial witness against the defendant and was not charged with *fujur* but nowadays it is more likely that both partners would be charged with *fujur* irrespective of sexual role. This demonstrates a clear shift in the court’s imagining of the criminal act presumed to have taken place since, in the 1975

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<sup>22</sup> Of course it should be noted that this use of moral language with regards to crimes, particularly those of a sexual nature, is not limited to homosexuality and as Ali rightly pointed out, in the Egyptian context heterosexuals (particularly women) are also subject to such ‘immoralizing’ discourse when they engage in sexual practices outside the sanctioned institution of marriage.

case it would seem that *fujur* was conceived of as the passive engagement in homosexual acts since the active partner was not prosecuted, but it would appear that now both the engagement passively and actively are criminalized.

It is important to both clarify and analyze at this point what I mean by ‘recognition’ in this instance and in the chapter more generally in order to further explicate what form of ‘crisis of recognition’ men are actually facing. In his book *In the Course of Recognition* Ricoeur undertakes an in-depth interrogation of ‘recognition’ in order to remedy what he saw as a lack of a comprehensive philosophical theory of recognition. Ricoeur outlines three main forms of recognition, the ‘recognition’ or identification of any thing as an object of knowledge, self-recognition and mutual recognition. For the purposes of this chapter I will focus on the first and third forms of recognition. When discussing the question of recognition as identification the legal provisions used to criminalize homosexuality immediately spring to mind; gay men are identified through their association with habitual acts rather than through a discourse of identity. The crisis arises from the fact that what men truly desire is not only something more akin to mutual recognition but that this identification in the law and the judicial system from their point of view is actually a form of ‘misrecognition’ based on the appraisal of their actions against what are considered to be generally accepted moral codes and values. Furthermore, this form of identification forecloses the possibility for mutual recognition since this identification entails a criminality. The problematic element in the language of the legal provisions used to criminalize homosexuality is that it does not recognize or identify gay men in terms of identity categories but only does so tacitly and in a convoluted manner through a an identification of a broad behavioral framework. In a sense then, what men found most frustrating was that, the only form of recognition in terms of acknowledgement they received was through the identification of acts that would in turn only be used to criminalize them.

Honneth identifies three models or forms pertaining to mutual recognition and those are love, universal respect and esteem (Honneth 1996). The form most relevant to the discussion at hand is universal respect. In differentiating between

respect and esteem it is perhaps , useful to turn to Darwall’s discussion of the two forms of respect; Darwall distinguishes between ‘recognition respect’ and ‘appraisal respect’ where he states that ‘recognition respect’ “...consists in giving appropriate consideration or recognition to some feature of its object...To say that persons as such are entitled to respect is to say that they are entitled to have other persons to take seriously and weigh appropriately the fact that they are persons in deliberating about what to do. Such respect is recognition respect; but what it requires as appropriate is not a matter of general agreement, for this is just the question of what our moral obligations or duties to other persons consist in” (Darwall 1977, 38). This is the ideal form of recognition that my informants hoped for but sadly rarely ever considered as a real possibility. The problem with the legal form of acknowledgment through criminalization is that it already places them in a less-than-equal position vis-à-vis society as at large. Following Honneth, Moyaert argues that “People experience being part of society only when they...can contribute to a common social project and the symbolic order from which society derives its identity” (Moyaert 2011, 91). While Honneth contends that legal recognition signifies the acceptance of those previously marginalized into the social fabric I agree with Moyaert’s criticism of Honneth, that the legal recognition of equality is not sufficient to redress the marginalization of groups. Moyaert points quite rightly to the entanglement of legal doctrine with the symbolic order of values and morals of a society and to redress marginalization would require a transformation of the symbolic order and not just legal status. It is precisely this entanglement of legal language with the symbolic order of moral values that allows the label of ‘habitual debauchery’ to be wielded in the way it has been with regards to gay men in Egypt. If we now return to the opening vignette we can see why my informants felt so strongly or were moved by gay men’s acceptance into the fold of protesters during the revolution; while this form of acceptance was entirely unrelated to legal standing it nevertheless entailed the form of recognition respect that men ultimately hoped for. Men did not assume that protesters had changed their views with regards to their sexualities but they had been accorded the same respected accorded any Egyptian who was involved in that struggle.

This confusing situation of continuous transformation and reinterpretation means that those of my informants completely unaware of the law assume and are continuously burdened by a sense of criminality while those aware of the confusing legal reality are catapulted into a state of limbo where they find themselves lost in a web of legal interpretation and manipulation and end up erring on the side of caution so as to avoid fates similar to the 'Cairo 52' and so would prefer to not be 'identified' by the legal establishment in order to avoid misrecognition. Unfortunately, this strange 'recognition dance', where homosexuality is only sometimes recognized as a formidable partner and remains absent and un-credited in the penal code is the only avenue available for any form of 'official recognition' or engagement with the law. When I was speaking with Malek about this chapter he simply said 'I wish homosexuality was criminalized explicitly, at least that way we'd know where we stand'. While an explicit criminalization of homosexuality would certainly reduce uncertainty this elimination of uncertainty may be equally if not more damaging because, without explicit criminalization, this process of criminalization of gay men becomes a 'task' for the security apparatus and, in a sense, gives men the opportunity to foil such attempts. Unfortunately understanding how to foil such attempts adds yet another layer of confusion since it relies on the accumulation of certain types of knowledge about the maneuvers necessary in the evasion of criminalization.

### **To Catch a Gay Man: The treacherous terrain of police questioning and detention**

During interviews with Noha Roushdy, a researcher at the EIPR, and Adel I was told several times that the biggest threat to gay men was their own limited, or in some cases non-existent, knowledge of the law, a factor that was fully exploited by the police during the interrogation process. This section will present the criminalization process in greater detail and highlight the importance of the period of interrogation and detention as a crucial juncture where the uneven and ambiguous terrain of illegality must be properly navigated. Furthermore, the discussion of this matter in a gay support group meeting will hopefully underscore how the skillful management of this process must be learned and how most men are unaware of the maneuverings necessary in dealing with it.



According to Adel, who served on the defense team in many cases of *fujur*, the majority of gay men are unaware that the law does not specifically criminalize homosexual acts between men and when they are asked if they perform *fujur* by the police they assume and are under the impression that they are asking them if they have sex with men (a confusion that is used to elicit confessions). The wider social rejection of homosexuality falsely convinces men that there must be a dimension of illegality to what is already deemed repugnant socially and religiously. When defense teams pick up cases of *fujur* the biggest hurdle they must usually contend with are confessions elicited from gay men; men are usually tricked into providing confessions under duress, the threat of or actual physical violence or through bogus deals whereby they are promised release but only if they were to inform on or testify against other men (in practice, when such ‘deals’ are made the police still charge both men).

During the interrogation process police officers also attempt to exploit men’s own personal, religious and moral struggles with their sexualities. In many cases policemen tell men that they would help them seek treatment and repent if they were to confess. According to Adel, these ploys are surprisingly successful since men are usually afraid, confused and have absolutely no form of legal representation at the time of those interrogations and thus fall easy prey to a police force that has, if nothing else, perfected its browbeating capabilities. Technically the prosecutor’s office can detain suspects for four days but they usually extend that on a weekly basis and keep men for a period between 3 to 5 months, in part, as a form of punishment. During that period men are usually kept in cells with other suspects who are aware of the charges leveled against them and so it is not uncommon for men to be beaten and sexually harassed by cellmates. Furthermore, according to Adel’s account, it is common for policemen to bring gay men out of their cells and take turns ridiculing them, harassing them and physically abusing them for their own amusement.

Men’s lack of knowledge of the law, the investigative and interrogation practices of the police and how to avoid police entrapment can be illustrated through one of the support group sessions directed precisely at informing men of

those practices. This short-lived support group<sup>23</sup> ran from January 2010 till John's deportation (which will be addressed in the following section) in March of the same year. We settled in for the first ever support group meeting at Malek and John's apartment on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2010. Malek had attended a regional meeting run by Helem<sup>24</sup>, a Lebanese NGO and the first LGBT rights organization to be established in an Arab country, a year earlier. The regional meeting had been aimed at assessing the needs of various LGBT communities in the region and at establishing strategies for cross-country cooperation and the promotion of an LGBT rights agenda across the Arab world. Given the risks associated with a politicized LGBT platform in Egypt<sup>25</sup> and the relatively violent 2001 crackdown on homosexuality, the creation of a small support group was seen as the most viable course of action as a starting point in Egypt. Malek and John generously and courageously took it upon themselves to host and organize those meetings<sup>26</sup>.

The issue of police harassment and men's feelings of insecurity was at the fore of group discussions from the beginning. For example, when men attempted to collectively fill in a 'needs-assessment survey' for a nascent regional NGO hoping to fund local grassroots LGBT efforts in Arab countries they ended up spending a considerable amount of time discussing men's feelings of insecurity. In response to one of the questions about the sorts of obstacles and difficulties men faced when dealing with their sexualities in Egypt Gigi spoke up almost immediately and said 'security of course' to a loud of hum of agreement from the rest of the group. Men understood that the scene was vulnerable to two

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<sup>23</sup> The number of men in attendance dropped considerably from the first support group meeting and, in the end, there was a core group of around ten, mostly upper-middle class gay men involved (there was one heterosexual married couple involved; they worked with the UNFPA in Egypt and were specifically interested in safe sex and STD prevention programs).

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.helem.net/>

<sup>25</sup> The aim of this support group was itself far from clear and many hours spent in those meetings were dedicated to figuring out precisely what it was that we hoped to accomplish given most men's reluctance to face the full force of the security apparatus or to engage in any overt political mobilization. The general consensus was any overtly political activity would draw too much attention and would ultimately prove counterproductive. Eventually the agenda we agreed upon was to use this as a platform for information sharing regarding STD/HIV prevention and legal rights and the legal status of homosexuality. If the support group had continued the plan was to break up into other groups so that this network could spread throughout the scene and remain anonymous or untraceable.

<sup>26</sup> John tried to stay out of the group discussions however because he repeatedly said that he thought it had to be an Egyptian endeavor.

sources of insecurity, the first being the risk of police and legal crackdowns similar to the one in 2001 and the second, crimes against the scene and gay men. Furthermore, when we attempted to rank those threats in terms of severity or importance ‘security’ came second but only to religion which men felt stifled society’s attempts at even recognizing homosexuality let alone tolerating it.

While, as stated earlier, discussions such as this one were a regular fixture of support group meetings one session was aimed specifically at improving men’s understandings of the law, their criminalization and how to avoid being brought before a court in the first place. This session was unanimously voted the most helpful and enlightening of all the meetings and men are actually now speaking of creating a website simply to disseminate the information covered in that session more widely. Gigi had gone to meet Adel at the EIPR in order to better understand the real threat to the community at the time and what to do in case of arrest. At the time of my fieldwork there was no organized crackdown similar to the one in 2001, however, when police ‘happened upon’ cases of homosexuality they pursued them nonetheless<sup>27</sup>. Gigi gave the example of a case Adel was working on at the time; a group of gay men had rented an apartment, were having a big party and the neighbors had complained repeatedly. After complaining several times the neighbors called the police and the police arrived to find a large group of gay men, one of whom was a minor. They were taken to the police station and “after *’alamein*” (‘after two slaps’) the minor ‘confessed’ he had had sex with one of the men and even added that he had been given money and this really gave the police a case where they had none.

Gigi began telling men what to do in case of arrest and all the men were completely engrossed in his instructions, repeatedly ensured that I, as resident researcher, was taking detailed notes that could be used later and only interrupted for important clarifications. Gigi spoke authoritatively as he told them what to do:

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<sup>27</sup> For example, in 2008 police arrested several HIV-positive gay men after two men were overheard arguing about a gay relationship (HRW 2008).

‘If they do take you, you have to appeal to *haq al khosooseya and haq ‘adam intihak al gasad* (the right to privacy and the right to bodily integrity). Usually during the long process of police questioning, which could very likely involve some slapping and hitting, they will tell you that you have to submit to a medical examination and will take you to a physician to examine you. It’s important to know that they do not have the right to force you to take your clothes off or to submit to an exam and even if we are asked by the doctor to take our clothes off we should not because that would mean we have voluntarily submitted to it. Saying things in a particular way and using jargon such as ‘bodily integrity’ would show them that we are aware of our rights and would scare them off. When they take us to the doctor we should ask him for his name and if he tries to get us to undress or to examine us we should threaten to report him to the Egyptian Medical Syndicate and this would definitely scare him off because his license would be revoked automatically.

At the police station we have to deny any wrongdoing regardless of what slurs are thrown at us (such as *khawalat*) or if they hit us and definitely do not admit to practicing *fujur*. During that initial questioning we would be speaking to a police officer but there is a difference between the officer and prosecutor (district attorney) who is supposed to take our official statements. We should never sign anything the officer tells us to sign because that’s usually how *beylaf’ao adaya* (entrap men or elicit false confessions). The prosecutor is the only one we should sign our official statement with and only after we’ve read it. It is our right to read it and the prosecutor might try to get us to waive that right by saying things like ‘*enta mesh ma’ameni?!?*’ (‘Don’t you trust me?’) but we should insist on reading anything before signing it.

The police have no right to take away our phones and we should try and record everything at the time of any arrest. Phones are vital because they have a lot of data on them such as numbers and contacts and they might start calling people and asking them questions so, if we feel that they are going to take our phones away, we should just smash them to the ground

and break them. Some of us have some ‘inappropriate’ photos and videos on there and it would probably be best if we deleted them or broke the phone even though pictures are circumstantial evidence.

Again, the worst thing to do is to confess or to tell on someone else because that would set the whole case in motion. You have to understand that *fujur* is not homosexual sex or sexual relations in general and so you have to keep reiterating that you do not practice *fujur*. If police were to come<sup>28</sup> (to a private residence or one of the meetings more specifically) they would already have some sort of information because they would not show up for absolutely no reason. We have to be careful not to invite them in or say anything that may be construed as an invitation since that would give them the right to enter even if they have no warrant. It would be safe to give him our IDs and it would be important for us to ask for his name. Again, denying any charges is the most important thing; denial, denial, denial. When dealing with the officer we have to show him that we are not afraid and that we are well connected, that would scare him and we have to ask for a lawyer as soon as possible’

The entire group listened intently as Gigi spoke, fumbled through the reams of notes he had in his lap, briefly lost his train of thought and then got back to specific steps one should take in case of arrest. It seemed like the group was captivated by the information Gigi was serving up; the meeting, which was usually an auditory confusion of strong opinions, loud pronouncement and (only occasionally) uneasy accusations was almost completely silent. What I am hoping to illustrate by including this lengthy ‘how to avoid police entrapment’ guide is the way in which this avoidance is far from clear and rests on understanding the law (aside from the way it has been implemented) and the tactics used by the police to elicit unjust and false confessions and accusations. The way this entire process is run and the various junctures at which men can escape not only trial but arraignment as well highlights the ambiguity and uncertainty of the criminalization of homosexuality.

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<sup>28</sup> He meant that as any private residence generally and to the place we were holding the meeting more specifically.

### **“He Had Too Many Male Visitors”: John’ deportation**

Considered by many to be ‘the king and queen of the scene’, Malek and John held glittering gatherings and wild parties at their Mohandessin apartment that had gay men scrambling to get in Malek’s good graces and on his guest list. The rigid landscape visible through their tenth floor windows, a mix of blues, purples and the splintered glints of brightly lit rooms and roof terraces always highlighted the dramatic double height ceilings in their living and dining areas, a favorite ‘scene-spot’. Malek and John courageously decided to offer up their home for the support group sessions despite their awareness of the considerably higher risk of similar gatherings.

John, an American executive at an international development agency project, had met Malek around two years before I started fieldwork at one of the many winter gay parties and they had moved in together a year into their relationship. Malek always felt uneasy about the way many people reacted to his relationship with an older American man (John was in his early forties at the time they met and Malek was in his early twenties) and knew that many men chose to keep their prejudice to themselves or limited to ‘scene-gossip’ only to secure continued access to their parties. Despite this uneasiness he was truly happy and, when discussing the decision to host the meetings at their apartment, continuously told me that it was because he and John had been lucky, were happy and wanted to make Cairo their permanent home but couldn’t do so without somehow becoming a part of a secure community.

It had already been almost two months into our meetings when I received an alarmed call from Malek. He didn’t bother with any pleasantries besides the initial obligatory ‘hello’ and immediately told me to delete any support group related emails we had exchanged. He didn’t want to spend too much time on the phone and would only tell me that John had received a call from the US Consulate following the receipt of a fax from Egyptian State Security informing them that they would be arresting and deporting John. We later found out that the fax had actually been sent by the Egyptian Passports, Emigration and Nationality

Administration (EPENA) seeking the US Consulate's cooperation in the deportation of a US citizen. The confusion must have happened because Malek and John were both disoriented and panicked when they spoke earlier that day. John had found out while he was at work and, fearing the worst (that the police were on their way to their flat to arrest Malek), had called, woken Malek up and told him to go over immediately to a friend's apartment a few roads down. The following few hours were an almost overwhelmingly confusing whirlwind of activity. The US Consulate could not initially find out the reasons for John's deportation and none of us had any way of knowing how serious the situation was, particularly for Malek because if the deportation was in any way related to his sexuality, as we all suspected, Malek would have been under surveillance as well.

John and Malek booked tickets to San Francisco via Frankfurt and made plans to leave in the wee hours of the following day but even that trip came with its own bag of troubles. Malek was terrified of going back to their apartment but had to pick up a university Certificate of Enrolment, a necessary document if the Ministry of Defense was to issue him a travel permit<sup>29</sup>. After an unsuccessful trip to the Ministry of Defense's twenty-four hour assistance desk, a disheartened Malek told me that this had all happened and that they were in this mess because they had been "greedy" and they should've been satisfied with what they had and shouldn't have insisted on improving anything, hosting parties or running a support group. Several other support group members had learned of what had happened and Malek was inundated with panicked calls he simply couldn't cope with. The news spurred a wave a panic in the scene, starting with other support group members, as men began deleting emails, texts, 'un-friending' Malek, John and other gay men on Facebook and some even went as far as deactivating their Facebook accounts altogether.

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<sup>29</sup> Military service is compulsory for all Egyptian males (barring any exemptions) but students (as was the case with Malek) are granted postponement until they are done with their studies. They are not however allowed to leave the country without travel permits that are issued per trip abroad. Furthermore, such permits are usually not given during term time and if students are in their final year of university studies (as was the case with Malek again) their applications are, in most cases, rejected unless sufficient evidence for exception is provided.

As the initial cloud of dust began to settle and more facts about the deportation emerged John and Malek's panic was placated, but only slightly. It became clear that John had several days to make arrangements for his move back to the US and that he wouldn't be arrested. While this was certainly better than the arrests they had anticipated it offered them little comfort since they knew Malek wouldn't be able to travel and, given his need for a permit, they had no way of knowing when they would see each other again<sup>30</sup>. John had to leave a few days after this all started up while Malek couldn't get a travel permit and had to move in with one of his sisters and her family.

What was and still remains most frustrating for everyone involved is that we never learned the specific reason for John's deportation or the specific government agency that ordered it. The only information the US Consulate was able to get was that the authorities had ordered the deportation because John "received too many **male** visitors and that they were concerned for **his** safety". The US Embassy was very helpful at the time however and Margaret Scobey, then US Ambassador to Egypt, had gotten involved but John wanted to curb any further escalation since he worried her efforts would antagonize the authorities, backfire and further inflame the situation. He worried that if that were to happen the authorities may resort to fabricating even more damning allegations or, even worse, placing the spotlight on the gay scene, resorting to public opinion and "turning it all into a circus". Memories of the Queen Boat trials and their brutal coverage flooded and swirled around John's mind and, in this case, the Queen Boat cautionary tale worked. John was uncertain about the actual reason for his deportation, the lengths the authorities would go to in order to find him culpable of some crime or other and their willingness to take this case public. In this instance, whether EPENA had any grounds for deportation was irrelevant since the uncertainty cloaking all of this made only one thing certain, that the authorities would find a way to deport John and that this would either be done the easy way or the hard way.

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<sup>30</sup> Even though Malek was in his final year at university, once he had graduated, he would have to wait for a medical examination and hope and pray for an exemption or to try and pull some strings or he would then have to serve a period of between twelve to thirty-six months. Since John's deportation in March 2010, they've only been able to spend a few weeks together in the summer of that year and Malek is still waiting to go through the conscription process.



Many men at the time considered John's deportation a wake-up call for the scene not to get too comfortable or complacent. It was incredibly interesting how John's deportation was assumed to have a wider impact on the scene and that the aftershocks of this incident would be felt for some time. Instances such as these that highlight the scene's vulnerability unfortunately drive the community further underground. Men have lamented how the 2001 crackdown resulted in the fraying of a community that had seemed so promising at the time; as one man told me 'you would have thought the Queen Boat would be our Stonewall but we're not strong enough, we all scurried away'. It seems that this fear of the community's lack of strength is a pervasive feeling. It is a structural vulnerability that some men would even go so far as saying is exploited by the authorities for the structural destruction of any burgeoning efforts for the fomentation of an actual community. A day after finding out about his deportation a saddened John told me that he worried about what news of his deportation would do to the scene. He said almost definitively that 'there won't be gatherings or parties out of fear of the police' and that he had seen it happen in the late 1990s and knew what kind of devastating effect this sense of insecurity can do to a developing scene. The scene certainly lost an important 'scene-place' (as will be discussed in another chapter) following this episode but eventually parties started cropping up again. What the authorities were able to quash however was the burgeoning politicization of the scene; none of the men involved in the support group would agree to start another one and, as news traveled, men who would've considered joining such efforts reconsidered such moves and ones who had warned of the dangers of such groups gloated.

Aside from the death of this budding political effort John's deportation had an even more pronounced negative effect on social relationships within the scene. As stated earlier, men deleted contacts and kept their distance from other gay friends. A lot of men almost immediately canceled any social plans with other gay men; for example, a farewell dinner for Edward, an American graduate student who had been studying in Cairo for years, had been planned for the night following the day we learned of John's deportation and all but one or two men decided to cancel the plans. Some of the men who 'un-friended' and kept their

distance from Malek and John in the first few days were some of their closest friends while, despite some hurt feelings, they were able to salvage their friendships, for men who were not as close however, this was a complete severing of social ties and one that neither party could, or wanted to recuperate from. While this may not seem like a destructive effect of John's deportation at first glance, for a scene that is essentially a network and bundle of social contacts and relations this is a tough blow.

Furthermore, Malek began hearing hurtful rumors and gossip around the scene. Some men had begun spreading stories about how the support group meetings were 'in reality' group sex parties and others began preemptively blaming Malek and the 'support group gang' for any future crackdowns on or wave of arrests in the scene. John's deportation represents yet another instance when the scene was recognized but only to be taught a lesson. Whether that was the actual intention behind the deportation is, in a way, irrelevant since it is perhaps more important and telling that it was taken as a warning and lesson.

### **Crime and the Scene**

The crimes committed against gay men and their lack of any institutional support system highlight yet another level of vulnerability. This is a vulnerability that is essentially about their ambiguous and uncertain place but a place that is nonetheless characterized by undesirability. In this section I am attempting to highlight the very real risk of crime in the scene and the ways in which such crimes punctuate an already pervasive sense of fragility and vulnerability. Furthermore, I hope to highlight how in-scene class-based fissures are created and fostered through the association of crime with the 'lower classes' and how they result from the assumption that risks can be reduced through increased class-insulation.

### **Gigi: 'The Patron Saint of Battered Queens'**

Malek finally received a travel permit from the armed forces in July 2010 and Ali and I made plans to drive him to the airport after a small farewell dinner in

downtown Cairo. It was already a little past two in the morning when Ali received a frenetic phone call from Gigi; Malek and I could only make out Gigi's faint, panicked voice and could hear Ali trying to calm him down. When Ali hung up a few minutes later he sounded a little exasperated as he told us that Gigi had set up a date with a stranger over the internet, had gone to meet him on a deserted stretch of road, had been attacked and was now worried that he had killed the man. Ali sounded frustrated with Gigi as he said that he had warned him about those dates time and time again and that this was the fourth time he had been attacked after agreeing to meet with complete strangers. At the time we all assumed that Gigi had exercised some degree of creative license and exaggerated the seriousness of the attack.

Ali and I eventually met up with Gigi on a dead Heliopolis street and it was only then, once we had seen the state of Gigi's car, that the seriousness of the attack dawned on us. The front of the car looked virtually unscathed but the rear door on the driver's side was crushed like a tin can, mangled and dented out of shape. Small, uneven shards of glass clung to parts of the window frame while the rest of the shattered remnants glistened in the backseat. A visibly distraught Gigi silently walked over to Ali and buried his face in his shoulder while Ali stroked and patted his back in an effort to comfort him. When he eventually pulled his face away from Ali's shoulder he inspected the damage to his car, softly said that he was sure the other man was dead and kept repeating that he could not believe he had killed another human being. A few minutes later he was finally able to tell us exactly what had happened. Gigi had met this man once before and kept repeating that he had seemed like a 'decent' man or *ibn nas* ('the son of good people'). He gave him directions to meet him somewhere he had never gone before and Gigi found himself on a deserted stretch of road with darkened agricultural plots to one side and a bare, brick wall to the other. Gigi lamentably said that he had intuitively sensed that something was wrong but, ignoring his suspicions, had decided to stay. Even more alarm bells had started going off when it seemed like the man was trying to find excuses for Gigi to get out of the car but, as he had done earlier, Gigi chose to ignore them. He did however lock his car doors when the man went off to pee to one side of the road. Gigi kept a hawk-like gaze on him, half expecting a whole gang of men to appear

from behind the brick wall and only spotted the other man darting towards his side of the car seconds before he threw his entire torso through the open window and grabbed ahold of the steering wheel. Gigi began yelling at him to get out of the car as he frantically tried to push his body out. In a panicked daze he shifted the car into gear, spotted a large lamppost to one side of the road and sped towards it. The post missed the front of the car and side mirror but the attacker's protruding lower body was slammed into it. The force of the impact spun the attacker's torso out of the car and sent his body hurtling into the rear car door, shattering the window and destroying the door. Gigi could see his body slumped on the ground as he sped off but he was distraught, in shock and could not bring himself to stop driving as far away as he could and only stopped once he had come to meet up with us. Gigi kept looking sadly at the car and repeating 'he must've died' and 'I am sure he's dead'. Ali, in an attempt to comfort him, told him that those men had obviously lured him into the middle of nowhere and would have had no qualms beating him or even killing him and, consequently, whatever Gigi did, he did out of self-defense. Gigi was still on the brink of tears when he exasperatedly said that he didn't care whether it was out of self-defense or not and that his attacker was still a human being.

None of us knew what course of action would be best vis-à-vis the authorities; Gigi was worried that those men would somehow report the accident as a hit-and-run since they knew he would be reluctant (to say the least) to tell the police that this had been a gay sex-date gone wrong. He decided to call a friend of his who happened to be a lawyer but chose to tell him that this had happened on a deserted street in Mohandessin. The lawyer advised him to report the accident at the nearest police station (to the supposed place of the attack) but of course not to tell the police that homosexuality was in any way involved. We had to drive to the other side of town and Ali rode with Gigi in an effort to comfort him and keep him calm. When I arrived at the police station a few minutes after them I found Ali waiting outside underneath a large florescent sign with a small black bag. He handed the bag over to me, told me to hide it in my car and, noting my quizzical expression, added that it was Gigi's 'lube bag' and that it would be best if the police didn't find it in his car when they came out to inspect it. He then added that they had crushed Gigi's phone SIM card and

thrown it in a dumpster on their way over but was then quick to add that it was his ‘gay phone’<sup>31</sup> so he still had all of his important contacts saved. On the drive to the station they had decided that it would be best to change the story completely since they were worried that the unaltered sequence of events would invite too many questions that Gigi simply would not be able to answer. They agreed that he would tell the police that he had parked his car on a darkened street in Mohandessin and had come down to find it in its current state but that he had seen two young men running off, away from his car. We stood there for around twenty minutes before Gigi came out and told us that he would have to go to a different police station for the actual inspection.

It was already close to five in the morning by the time we got to the other station, the darkened streets were deathly still and all one could hear were the faint murmurs of a city fast asleep. We had ridden in separate cars once again and so Ali told me that the lawyer had advised Gigi to change his story once again; he thought it would be best not to mention anything about seeing anyone run away from the car. A police officer had come out for a quick inspection before I had arrived and thought it odd that there was a massive dent in one of the doors; the officer had said that the shattered window made perfect sense if this was a robbery but that mangling the door seemed to serve no purpose. Gigi had felt the need to say that his phone was stolen simply to try and justify someone causing that much damage to his car. Now that the officer had taken Gigi into the station for his statement Ali and I stood chatting for almost an hour. Ali once again said that he had warned Gigi about those dates and added that when he had gotten robbed it hadn’t been as serious and he had been a little more collected. I was surprised that he had been threatened and robbed on a date but Ali was quick to tell me that this was a ‘common problem’ on the scene. He had arranged to meet up with a man in Maadi through the Internet and Ali added that he seemed pretty ‘decent’ when they met and that he even spoke English rather fluently. They went for a walk through the confusing, winding and maze-like

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<sup>31</sup> A lot of men have separate phones for their gay contacts. Depending on the extent of their ‘closetedness’ men choose which contacts to switch to their ‘regular phones’. For example, some men, like Gigi, only save sex-dates and distant gay acquaintances on that phone but all other gay friends on his ‘regular phone’ while other men save all of their gay contacts on a separate ‘gay phone’.

roads of the neighborhood before coming to a stop outside a building. The date told him he only needed to stop for a few minutes to pick something up and so they made their way down a narrow corridor and into a small room underneath a stairwell at the back of the building. When they walked into the room Ali felt somewhat uneasy and intuitively sensed that something was wrong but, when he turned around to leave, found another man blocking the doorway. The man stood in the doorway looked menacingly at him before pulling out a pocketknife. Ali turned around to his date and asked him (in English) ‘what is this?’ and his date responded with ‘it’s what it seems’ (also in English). He was lucky since he hadn’t been carrying his credit cards or a large sum of cash on him but he still felt hurt and fooled and was particularly incensed when his date attempted to frame this robbery as some sort of ‘moral duty’. The man had told him that he was hoping that by robbing homosexuals and meeting them through the Internet that this would somehow force them to reevaluate their sexuality and perhaps motivate them to ‘mend their ways’. Ali was understandably outraged that those men could, not only justify terrorizing and robbing gay men, but could audaciously frame it as a form of moral or social service. Ali started saying that what happened with him and Gigi unfortunately underscored how important it is to “try and date people from the same...” and paused uncomfortably for a moment searching for the right words before continuing with “...not social class, but social configuration lets say”.

By the time Gigi re-emerged from the station the *fajr* call to prayer had rung through the otherwise silent streets and the sun had slowly crept up on us. Gigi had followed the lawyer’s advice and given the investigating police officer ‘grease money’ who then responded with an expected ‘anything you want pasha’. Gigi was distraught, disheveled and almost nothing we could say could placate his deep sense of guilt; we had finally managed to convince him that the man he had hit was probably still alive but there was no denying, given the state of the car door, that he must have been injured. Gigi was still speaking of his guilt when Ali interjected rather forcefully and told him that we had no way of knowing how many other gay men had been attacked, beaten or even killed by those men and we also had no way of knowing how many other men would have fallen prey to his injured attacker. Ali then jokingly added that, if anything, Gigi

should be celebrated and dubbed the “patron saint of battered queens” and that an imposing statue of Gigi holding the mangled blue car door as a shield against would-be gay bashers should be erected in the Jardino<sup>32</sup>.

I had heard of several instances when criminals targeted gay men precisely because of their vulnerability and their inability to appeal to the authorities for help but it was the first time I had become involved in any way. Ali’s confident assertion that crimes against gay men were commonplace and that it had added yet another layer of precarity to the scene’s daily existence was unfortunately accurate. Gigi had been attacked four times, Ali once and, as I spent more time in the field, I realized that almost every single man I know had similar stories or ‘close calls’. The fact that men cannot report such crimes to the authorities accurately (as in Gigi’s case), if at all, meant that men felt that they were in a perilous position and that ‘the scene’ should be able to fend for itself since the authorities, in anything, can only be counted on for harassment and criminalization.

Malek had told me a few months earlier that a gay man had been attacked in his home and had asked his immediate friends to spread the story in the hopes that it would help other men avoid a similar situation. A couple of weeks later we happened to bump into that man, Abdelhalim, on a street near Malek’s place and he gave us a more detailed account of his ordeal. He had taken a man he had met through one of the online dating websites home but only after meeting him in a public place. He usually met men in public to spare both of them the embarrassment if one of them wasn’t attracted to the other in person but meeting in public also gave him the opportunity to assess whether that person was in any way a risk. The young man seemed ‘decent enough’ and they went home together. Upon walking through his front door the date said that he had forgotten about a prior engagement and needed to use the bathroom before heading off. A few minutes after he had gone into the bathroom Abdelhalim went to answer a knock on the door and found two complete strangers. When he turned around to look in the direction of the bathroom his date was coming towards him with a

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<sup>32</sup> A popular gay cruising area that is discussed in much more detail in chapter four.

pocketknife. They tied him up and he watched as they rummaged through his flat and picked up whatever they felt like stealing. At one point one of the men received a call from what seemed like another gay date and, once he had hung up, he smiled and told his friends that they were in for a treat since that other man had a car. Once they were done they told him he looked like a ‘nice, decent’ man and untied him but warned against contacting the police and convincingly threatened that they would know if he were to do otherwise.

He had decided while the robbers were there not to contact the police since they knew where he lived and seemed unlikely to have any qualms about physically attacking him if things came to that. After spending days in fear however he decided to call a distant acquaintance in State Security and told him the full story. When the officer asked him how he had met those men he told him “*ana khawal*” (‘I’m a faggot’). The officer responded with “*dole betoo’ el khawalat*” (‘those are the faggots’ ones’) and that they had arrested one of them but Abdelhalim said it did not seem to be high on their list of priorities and he did not pursue the investigation any further. Abdelhalim was still visibly shaken and jumpy when we bumped into him and he described how he had put a lock on the inside of his bedroom door and made nightly rounds around the flat to make sure he had closed all of the shutters.

Most men accepted such attacks as fact and, sadly, did not feel that they were in any way entitled to the state’s protection. Warning others and serving themselves as cautionary tales became one of the few avenues for securing a scene that was being exploited and manipulated by both the authorities and a criminal class aware of its precarious position. As Malek exasperatedly and resentfully said when he initially told me of Abdelhalim’s story, “*haga weskha, min nahya el police w min nahya el nas di wehna fel nos mafshookheen!*” (‘It’s disgusting, we’ve got the police on one side and those people on the other and we’re in the middle, fucked!’).



## **Conclusion**

This chapter explored the general state of insecurity, precariousness and instability that men and the scene find themselves in due to the state's treatment of homosexuality and its de facto criminalization of same sex sexual relations. The Egyptian state's engagement with homosexuality is predicated upon the latter's criminalization through the identification and acknowledgment of acts rather than identities thereby limiting the ways in which men can strive for 'recognition'. Furthermore, the fact that legal provisions do not specifically criminalize same-sex sexual relations but the use of the somewhat ambiguous terms 'habitual debauchery' adds to the uncertain yet unstable position of gay men. Through a presentation and examination of various interactions my informants have had with authorities such as John's deportation and Gigi's reporting of his accident I have attempted to highlight the scene's convoluted relationship with the state and highlight how a sense of insecurity permeates the scene.

Due to this pervasive sense of insecurity and vulnerability we find that men are attempting to re-position themselves vis-à-vis the state through attempts at mastering techniques that would allow them to outsmart the security apparatus and to capitalize on the law's ambiguity. For example, the support group meeting discussion of police interrogation and how men could avoid detention and arrest was one way in which men were attempting to master the system. As they saw, if they could not fight for recognition they could, in some sense, avoid and fight a misrecognition.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Subjectivity, Recognition and ‘Moments of Disclosure’**

Two weeks into fieldwork I found myself walking into an art gallery opening in the heart of Zamalek with Ess and Malek. The gallery was a converted flat in one of the many upper-scale residential buildings flanking the Nile. Doors that separated various rooms had been removed and there was nothing but the original, creaking parquet flooring and brightly painted canvases to greet the eye. As we walked through the double doors into the main foyer Malek stopped to speak with a girl he had recognized. Forty minutes and two cigarette breaks later we were at the back of the flat in a small room where home accessories, clothes, jewelry and other bits and pieces were being sold. This newly established brand, *Horreya*, had become quite well known for its use of ‘traditional’ Egyptian prints usually associated with the countryside and adapting them for ‘trendy urbanites’. Many of the products were either fully draped in or lined with a floral explosion of fuchsia, apple green and cobalt.

As always, Ess relished the attention he was receiving as he strutted from room to room, occasionally lifting an exaggeratedly limp wrist to point at one painting or another; his behavior was enough to draw some attention but not to make anyone too uncomfortable. When he eventually found his way to the room at the back of the gallery he made a quick beeline for a cabinet housing shirts, dresses and cushions at the far end of the room. He then picked up one of the short ruffled skirts and put it to his waist. As he thrust one hip forward and struck a pose he turned to both Malek and I and asked “how do I look?” Several pairs of eyes darted his way but were quick to look away again. Malek sent a few furtive glances ricocheting around the room before moving closer to Ess and, in a hushed tone, asking him to ‘tone it down’ since the girl he had bumped into on the way in was a family member and then added ‘she’s extended family, so it’s the worst’. I had expected Ess to fire back with one of his usual, nonchalant retorts and was surprised when he immediately put the down skirt and backed away from the cabinet, telling Malek he understood.

The ever-presence of ‘the family,’ as actual kin, family friends and acquaintances of kin, means that men can never fully enjoy the freedom associated with complete anonymity; there was always the sense that they may at any point run into a family member, distant relation or acquaintance and, as this vignette illustrates, they regularly did. The anxiety associated with these run-ins was essentially one about the control of disclosure and knowledge about their sexualities.

To ‘come out’ to one’s family was a decision not to be taken lightly and the harrowing self-doubt most of my informants experienced in deciding whether or not to take the plunge reflects not only their misgivings and ambivalence regarding the notion of ‘coming out’ in general, but also where such a move placed them vis-à-vis their families. In this chapter I will highlight the enduring centrality of the family unit and the ways in which various men have dealt with the idea of coming out to their closest kin. The aim of this chapter is to problematize the notion of ‘coming out’ as a temporally-bound, subject-altering move and to highlight its processual nature and its imbrication in a process of subject formation that is itself fraught with conflict and fragmentation. What I am essentially trying to do is to sketch some of the ways in which men, through their placement within familial networks, were continually being made into certain types of subjects and then how their homosexuality disrupted such a process of subjection.

### **Families and Marriage**

The centrality of both the nuclear family and its ever-expanding network of kin and non-kin relations is a recurring feature in almost all research on Egypt. It is nearly impossible to accurately analyze or present the actions of individuals without accounting for their placement within such wider frameworks of family relations precisely because men always spoke of themselves as already deeply imbedded within those networks. A return to the notion of connectivity presented in the introduction would be useful at this point of the discussion in order to highlight what it was specifically about my informants’ relationships with their families that complicated matters for their sexualities and the very idea of

‘coming out’. As explicated earlier, Joseph uses the notion of connectivity to explain the centrality of family relations to processes of selving in the Arab world. Using connectivity allows us to acknowledge and address the relational aspect of selving and subjectivities in the Arab world and the context of this research. In such a formulation “...a person’s boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others. Persons do not experience themselves as bounded, separate, or autonomous” (Joseph 1999: 12). In contexts where such an intense sense of connectivity prevails (as is the case with my informants) self and other are so enmeshed that persons derive their sense of being through their emplacement within such networks of connectivity. The problem with men’s homosexuality is that it places their positions within such matrices of connection (and by extension their processes of selving) at risk. Ghannam also highlights the importance of others, particularly close kin, in the constitution of the self and, more specifically, the gendered masculine self. Writing about the ‘gendered socialization’ of a young boy Ghannam writes that “He is not trained to enact the autonomous ethos that many Americans may view as essential in the right way to raise children” (Ghannam 2013: 56). Ghannam argues that Ahmed, the young boy, is taught to appreciate the role played by others in his masculine trajectory (as an aspect of selving) and those significant others comprise both family relations and more distant acquaintances. The acknowledgment of this connective view of Egyptian families is vital to our understanding of how dangerous homosexuality can be not only to men’s standing within their families but to their processes of selving as well.

As an example we can look at the ways in which the centrality of the family was underscored in my informants’ accounts of their family lives, particularly during the period of protests and unrest in January 2011. During that period most of my informants made it perfectly clear that their primary allegiance was to their families and that their main responsibility was to secure their families’ well-being and their homes. In the year leading up to the protests a group of around seven men had gotten into the habit of spending their Thursday nights at Sayed’s Mohandessin apartment. While various other people would join in on random occasions, this small group made it a ritual of sorts to meet every week, drink hashish-laced hot chocolate and dance, talk or watch movies until

the early hours of the morning. When police forces disappeared off the streets of Cairo on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January and residents all over the city organized themselves into neighborhood watch groups to secure their homes almost all the men I knew went home at night to join in those groups and to patrol their local areas until the morning before heading off to the protests in Tahrir Square. When they spoke of those nightly patrols it was framed as an absolute duty.

During that period several of the men who had regularly spent their Thursdays at Sayed's continued going there during the curfew hours as opposed to heading home and joining their local groups. I received several calls from mutual friends and acquaintances, such as Gigi, expressing their shock and deep disappointment with those men and their seeming neglect of their familial obligations. During one of those calls Gigi reserved the greatest level of criticism for Haitham, a medical student in his mid-twenties who was spending the night at Sayed's, because he had lied to his mother and had told her he was needed at the hospital to treat casualties just so he could slip out at night. Gigi was absolutely outraged by Haitham's decision to, not only leave his mother and younger brother at home by themselves, but to lie about his whereabouts as well and to frame his absence as some sort of duty. Gigi added that those men had not even joined Sayed's local patrol group. This was presented as yet more evidence of their lack of respect for family. Sayed had moved into a flat in a building owned by his boyfriend's family a few years earlier and it had become his permanent residence. His boyfriend, a young man in his early thirties named Yassin, had moved to Beirut for work a couple of years earlier but Sayed had stayed in the same flat and was joined by Yassin whenever he got time off. Various members of Yassin's family, including aunts, uncles and cousins, occupied the remaining flats. Since Yassin's family had in some ways 'welcomed' Sayed<sup>33</sup> into their building, his decision not to patrol their neighborhood was considered a further affront to family values. While this period of protest was of course of exceptional historical significance it highlighted men's deep attachment to their families. Furthermore, for the most part, the way men behaved towards their families and familial obligations was

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<sup>33</sup> They were never explicitly told that he was Youssef's boyfriend though.

considered, as exhibited here in Gigi's outrage, as a reflection of how 'good' they were as a whole mirroring a popular proverb '*el maloosh kheir fi ahlo maloosh kheir fi had*' (He who is not good to his family cannot be good to anyone).

Almost all of my informants were unmarried and in their twenties or early thirties and so, as Egyptian custom would dictate, still lived with their parents and other unmarried siblings<sup>34</sup>. Given marriage's role in the conference of adulthood, the widespread view of never marrying as a 'failure' of some sort or cause for pity, it is perhaps unsurprising that "Marriage becomes universal among women in their early thirties and among men in their mid-thirties..." and "...remains nearly universal among the older age groups for both sexes, with 99.7% of males and 98.2% of females aged 50 and above..." having been married at one point in their lives (Dhillon et al. 2009, Sieverding and Elbadawy 2011: 118). In fact, much of the recent literature on youth in Egypt has been concerned with the dilemmas posed by the troubling delay in marriage age. A dire problem of unemployment and the exorbitant costs associated with marriage have meant that fewer young men and women and their families were able to afford it. Many researchers have described this delay in marriage as a form of stalled transition into adulthood where the majority of young people felt as though they were stuck in a state of perpetual 'waithood' (Assad and Barsoum 2009; Singerman 2007). Given the importance accorded marriage<sup>35</sup>, it is unsurprising that explaining one's decision not to marry was a source of constant anxiety for those of my informants who had not and did not wish to disclose their sexualities to their families. As men mostly from upper, upper-middle and middle class backgrounds my informants faced an even more pressing need to explain their decisions not to wed because they did not have to contend with as

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<sup>34</sup> There were several exceptions but the overwhelming majority lived with their families. Even though some older gay men moved out of their family homes later in life the vast majority of men, even those in their forties end up living with their parents.

<sup>35</sup> It is worth noting the relationship between marriage, the establishment of family units and religion since the duty to marry is regularly phrased in terms of religious as well as filial and familial duty. Since pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relations are completely prohibited, a reluctance to marry carries along with it the threat of moral corruption. Many families urge their children, particularly their sons, to marry in order to avoid sinful temptations. In fact, a popular proverb states '*el gawaz nos el din*' (Marriage is half of one's religion) since it steers one clear of those dangerous temptations.

many of the financial hardships associated with the wider trend of marriage delay. Almost all of my informants had more or less secure employment prospects and families willing to contribute to varying degrees towards their marriage costs and the young couple's new life together. "By convention, men in Egypt are expected to provide housing for the joint residence upon marriage, while women are expected to purchase a large part of the household furnishings. Often..." through "...the brideprice (*mahr*) that the groom pays to the bride" (Sieverding and Elbadawy 2011: 125). Furthermore, men are also expected to present gifts to the bride in the form of jewelry (*shabka*) as part of the initial marriage investments. Because of these substantial investments in marriage, men, particularly those from more affluent backgrounds, received help from their families especially in the provision of a joint family home, bride price and *shabka*. Since many of my informants had such familial support readily available they felt the need and were expected to explain their 'voluntary waitness'.

In a related vein, men's sexualities could have had a real impact on the marriageability of their closest kin. In the opening vignette Malek asked Ess to tone down his behavior because, as far as his distant relative was concerned, Ess' flamboyant behavior would not only reflect poorly on Malek but on his immediate family as well. Malek feared that word would travel through the extended family grapevine and that the incident would be an opportunity for distant relations to speak disparagingly of his parents and siblings. Men were even more keenly aware of their delicate placement within these networks when a taboo subject such as homosexuality was concerned since idle gossip was perhaps the least harmful outcome of social missteps. The all-important 'family name' and reputation was always placed in jeopardy whenever control over disclosure is not managed properly. While I will discuss Malek's 'coming out' story in greater detail in the following sections, in the middle of a conversation about his five older sisters he once said that he was not surprised that the two sisters most opposed to his 'lifestyle' were those who had daughters and added, in a matter-of-fact sort of tone, that his nieces' marriageability was more likely to be negatively affected by news of his sexuality. Citing the traditional proposal scenario, where a suitor's family would ask around about a potential bride's family background and reputation before deciding whether or not to propose, he

added that news of a gay uncle would have made it highly unlikely that ‘respectable’ families would propose. The potential effects of men’s sexualities on ‘family name’ and reputation were a source of constant anxiety for most men. During one of the many cruising excursions with Malek in the *Jardino* we stopped on one of the quieter side streets to speak with a man in his early twenties. Standing outside our cars, we exchanged our agreed-upon fake names and chatted briefly with him. When we asked if he ever went to any gay house parties he responded with an emphatic ‘no’. He reasoned that the *Jardino* was a safer option since there was less risk of arrest or police interference unless one was to do something completely outrageous. He then laughed loudly, gestured wildly and explained how he could come up with a multitude of explanations as to why he was driving on the street but if he was caught in *sha’a mafrousha* (‘furnished apartment’; when used as an expression, as is the case here, it connotes some kind of ‘den of iniquity’ or a place for prostitution) his mother wouldn’t even come down to the police station to bail him out because that would be even more disastrous for the family since it would imply some form of tacit acceptance.

For many men, particularly younger ones, parents remained an important source of financial as well as emotional support. While many of my informants came from relatively comfortable backgrounds economically, they still remained in one way or another dependent on their parents financially. For example, living at home alleviated a lot of financial pressure even for young professionals. Many men would not have necessarily been able to support their standards of living if they were to rely solely on their salaries. As mentioned earlier, the family usually helped in the provision of the joint marital home but most families would only provide such a home once a man was married and almost never to bachelors. This financial dependence was one reason why many young men put off disclosing their sexuality to their families. Sexuality aside, many men, depending on their level of financial dependence on their parents, were aware of the degree of power their parents wielded simply as a result of this relationship of dependence. For example, during a late night car ride to the *Jardino* with Shamel, an aspiring actor in his twenties from a lower-middle class background, he told me that his parents had threatened to withhold their financial support if he



insisted on pursuing his acting ambition. Interestingly enough, they had not cut him off once they had found out about his homosexuality but their threat to withdraw their financial support with regards to his career choices was a reminder of the powerful hand they had to play in his decisions.

Men's emotional dependence on their families was perhaps just as equally, if not more, important than their financial dependence on them. Of course the level of emotional intimacy between men and their families is difficult to measure or describe accurately but, despite a varying level of closeness between men and their families, almost all of them felt deeply bound to them and many expressed worry at the hurt they would be causing their closest kin should they find out about their sexualities. So when men spoke of their worries and concerns about 'coming out' to parents and economic independence it was not simply that they worried about the withdrawal of financial support but they regularly stated that they would have liked to offset the power differentials in their relationships with their families so that they could feel more confident in arguing 'their cases'.

The ever-presence of 'the family', both immediate and extended, alluded to earlier was heightened by the class-segregation of the city. Since family members, relations and close acquaintances tended to fall within the same or similar socioeconomic strata they were highly likely to frequent the same class-specific places and establishments that were a more general feature of Cairene lifestyle. Because of this spatial segregation men always spoke of a lack of anonymity and the possibility that they could be watched or their actions picked up on at any time. When men spoke of this lack of anonymity they almost always spoke in reference to their families and they almost always feared, as Malek did, that word of their behavior would travel through gossip routes back to their families or to even more extended contacts.

### **'Coming out'**

"I am gay". Those were the words Malek had uttered aloud to an empty room the day he 'came out to himself'. Facing a large mirror, he had planted his feet

firmly on the ground and spoken those words. We were sitting at a mutual friend's dining room table late one night when Malek began telling us how he still remembered the very first time he ever verbalized his homosexuality to himself. Aside from Salah's next-door-neighbor, who yelled obscenities through the window in a futile attempt to get us to lower our voices, the scene seemed perfectly set for this impromptu heart-to-heart. Malek smiled somewhat sheepishly as he recalled that day. He said he knew how silly and ridiculous he must have looked and sounded but that it had been a necessary step in his quest for self-acceptance and recognition. Several other men have since described similar instances of self-disclosure, of such moments when they had 'come out to themselves'. Moments that were usually contrasted with earlier periods of willful denial, periods during which they had attempted to stifle or ignore their desires.

The subject of or questions regarding 'coming out' and ideas of self-disclosure did not appear regularly in casual conversation and at times when they were addressed, as the next paragraph demonstrates, discussions could turn quite sour. Disclosure was most present in discussions of its avoidance or the fear of having one's sexuality disclosed. There is no direct equivalent in Arabic to the phrase 'to come out' but men from almost all backgrounds drew directly upon the English phrase when they asked or were asked the almost obligatory "*enta out?*" (are you out?).

The reluctance to discuss matters of self-disclosure is perhaps less surprising given the heated reactions elicited by the topic of 'coming out' and associated ideas about visibility during a tense exchange at the first of our short-lived support group meetings. The 2001 crackdown on Cairo's gay scene was a potent reminder of the perils of visibility and unnecessary attention so it is easy to imagine how strongly opposed some men were to any discussions of outing. Despite a text clearly stating the meeting would start at seven it was not until just after eight that Malek had started explaining what he hoped the group would do. Fourteen men littered his and John's large living area with some perched on their black leather sofas while others lounged on oversized cushions dotting the floor. Ali, charged with chairing the meeting, began by explaining that the initial session was essentially to help crystalize the group's mission or goals. It was not

long before the living area was turned into a whirlwind of excited voices and loud laughs. Ali did his best to keep the disorganized chatter under control and the discussion on track but every few minutes a new topic would come up that would have men in an uproar. The issue of ‘coming out’ was one such topic and the fervent exchanges surrounding this issue bordered dangerously on the hostile. The argument about ‘coming out’ erupted following a comparison between Cairo and Beirut. Malek had been saying that the situation facing gay men in Beirut was entirely different because there were at least a few public places, such as clubs or bars, that catered predominantly and rather openly to LGBTQ clientele when Shadi, one of the older men on the scene (in his late-thirties), interjected, arguing that all the men there had to ‘come out’, suffer and then ask for acceptance but that ‘coming out’ was a necessary step in the quest for societal acceptance. He then added that he had come out to his family and that despite the harrowing nature of the experience he still felt that it was absolutely necessary. A young gay man in his twenties, Ahmed, then joined in rather aggressively and stated confidently that all the men in the room were from the upper-classes and came from educated, well-to-do families and so had no excuse not to ‘come out’. The room was almost immediately engulfed in a riotous wave of unhappy voices. Almost all the men, with the exception of Shadi, were disagreeing with Ahmed’s assertion. This auditory confusion of opinions lasted a couple of minutes until Ousama, visibly annoyed, stated rather loudly that ‘coming out’ was a very personal matter and that it was no one else’s business whether he chose to ‘come out’ to his family or not. Ali stepped in again to defuse the tense situation and ended the discussion by saying that ‘coming out’ should not be a prerequisite for activism and that none of the men there could push such a decision on anyone.

I got a chance to speak with Ousama alone on our drive back home later on in the evening and upon reopening the discussion he explained how he lived with his mother and seventeen-year-old brother and was adamant that he would never ‘come out’ to his mother. He had established the importance of his privacy when he was in high school and his mother had learned not to question where he went or how late he stayed out but their relationship was not devoid of all friction and they would occasionally argue about her interference in his life. Unable to see any conceivable benefit to coming out, he stated rather confidently that he

knew for a fact she would never be able to accept it and that, on the contrary, it would simply break her heart to find out about his sexuality. Given the damage and hurt this revelation would cause he reasoned that it would be incredibly selfish of him to ‘come out’ to his mother and that he would rather just move away, perhaps to a foreign country, where he could be himself and where he would be able to live as he wished while sparing his mother the hurt.

While the topic of ‘coming out’ had been carefully avoided for the rest of the workshop in the hopes of staving off further discord Ali and I spoke briefly about it as we walked to the car later on. Given Ali’s incredibly keen insights into the scene and using the US gay rights movement as a reference point, I asked Ali if he thought men in Egypt would ever ‘come out’ as a form of political protest. Ali said a lot had to change before such protest becomes possible because men were not willing to ‘die for the cause’ and were not strong enough or committed enough as individuals to pull something like that off. He did not foreclose the potential for such political action in the distant future but, for the time being, it seemed like such orchestrated political ‘outing’ was a case of hopeful but not entirely wishful thinking.

### **Subjectivity and ‘Coming Out’**

It may be useful to begin our analysis by viewing ‘coming out’ as a particular type of disclosure in a quest for recognition but what is perhaps most interesting is what it is that is being put forward for recognition. Men often spoke of ‘coming out’ in English and never felt the need to qualify the term with any further explanation. To ‘come out’, it was assumed, was to disclose one’s homosexuality to another party but, in many cases, that unarticulated party was a man’s immediate family<sup>36</sup>. Put succinctly, ‘coming out’ represents moments of “gay self-disclosure” (Sedgwick 1990: 67). What I find most interesting however is how in those ‘instances of disclosure’ a person’s homosexuality comes to represent, no matter how briefly, the totality of their ‘being’. I will argue that ‘coming out’ is problematic because my informants felt a deep sense of

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<sup>36</sup> In contrast, for example, with saying ‘coming out to myself’.

discomfort with the process of 'subject-fixing' that inevitably came along with those instances of disclosure and yet how they also felt a yearning for the promise of this intersubjective experience and the recognition of an aspect of their selves that was usually kept carefully hidden. I will then move on to question the assumed transitional nature of 'coming out'; I will highlight the tensions and slippages that are part of the 'coming out' process and how such tensions rendered coming out nearly 'impossible' for some men.

The initial neatness of binarisms such as outside/inside that seem to be subsumed within the notion of 'coming out' have not gone uncontested; as Sedgwick explains "...there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them" (Sedgwick 1990: 68). Since there seems to be no realistic, absolute state of 'outedness' we must always speak of particular instances of disclosure within specific contexts. As some men, such as Shadi seem to think, such disclosures are necessary for recognition and acceptance. The recognition that some men hoped to receive as a result of 'coming out' is, in a way, subject-forming; it is one way in which their subjectivity (albeit artificially reduced to their sexual subjectivity) is temporarily and in that instance of disclosure "...guaranteed by a matrix of social relationships" (Moore 1994: 39).

Problems begin to arise when men, such as Ousama, question the efficacy or fulfillment promised by such acts of disclosure. While I would not want to understate the extreme difficulties men faced in keeping their homosexuality secret, the emotional and psychological strain that accompanied such endeavors and the potential for self-disclosure to alleviate some of that strain (even if only temporarily), I think what has to be further problematized is the placement of sexual subjectivities being articulated and disclosed within a wider context of 'the subject' or a more general understanding of subjectivity. I am not trying to question the appropriateness of using sexual orientation categories such as gay, straight and so forth but the way that sexual subjectivity is brought forward as a representation of a distinct subject.

Given that the subject is never a unitary, bounded entity but "...exists as, a set of multiple and contradictory positionings and subjectivities" (Moore 1994: 55) the problem with instances of disclosure (and hence 'coming out') is, unlike many other possibly conflicting aspects or elements of subjectivity, one's homosexuality is brought forth and articulated. Subjectivity can be a somewhat slippery and elusive term to use analytically but I find Ortner's succinct elucidation of what she means when she uses the term quite helpful; Ortner writes that, by subjectivity, she means "...the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects" (Ortner 2005: 31). Furthermore, she adds that, she will also always mean "...the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on" (Ortner 2005: 31). That said however, given that praxis and the experience of subjectivity always takes place socially, it is generated, shaped and continually remapped through interaction and in tandem with the unfolding of others' subjectivities; in my informants' cases, family members represented those most vested in such a process of intersubjective reckoning. Homosexuality represents a particular form of sexual subjectivity that is only one element in this process but it is a subject-position that must be disclosed (since it is not outwardly visible) in order for it to be recognized but then such a disclosure automatically places it at the forefront. For example, a statement such as Malek's 'I am gay' temporarily banishes all other possible disclosures such as 'I am a brother' or 'I am a son' to the background. I think it is this move, particularly given the importance of the family unit described earlier, that triggered men's fears and anxieties. This is especially true since the ramifications of such a disclosure seem to automatically place men outside the bounds of the familial framework. For men to break with their assumed heterosexuality is to also break with the imaginings of their own, future heterosexual family units.

Saeed, a young interior designer in his early twenties, was a regular at Sayed's Thursday gatherings and we spent countless hours together at numerous gay parties around Cairo but when I sat down to interview him I was surprised to find out in the first few minutes of our conversation that he was planning to marry a woman. Caught off guard, I tried to delicately ask him why he wanted to marry a woman if he was certain he was gay. He answered with, "I'm intending

to get married...I don't know, I just have this fear from the future". When I asked him "in what sense?", he simply said "In the sense of...like, one has to have a meaning of life or a reason to live for, especially when you're older *fa* (so) I'm not sure other than having children (what) is the main reason for you to live for". He then added that he had given the matter much logical consideration and that he was only waiting till he felt more financially secure and for the right girl. When I then enquired as to whether or not he would tell her of his sexuality he got slightly uncomfortable and said that he would definitely not but that he "...would stop meeting guys of course". In Saeed's case, he could not imagine a happy future without a family and children of his own and could not imagine such a family without a wife. As he stated rather clearly, having children and a family were, as far as he was concerned, the greatest reason to live, they were capable of fulfilling a person's sense of self in a way that was, to his imagination, unrivaled. As a result, 'coming out' to his family would have only been an unnecessary complication since his plan was to settle down and have a monogamous, heterosexual family<sup>37</sup>.

The fall outside the bounds of the traditional family and its attending networks of social relations was considered lamentable. Given the centrality of the family described earlier one of the most problematic elements of men's homosexuality was their inability to ensure this familial continuity. This sad fact seemed to take on even greater power when men disclosed their homosexuality to their families. Over the course of my fieldwork I grew to deeply respect and admire Ali, the 27-year-old who was in charge of chairing the support group sessions. His erudite and insightful analyses of goings-on on the scene and his highly informed discussions of philosophy and queer theory never ceased to amaze me. Ali became an avid reader at a very young age, consuming major and abstruse texts such as Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in his mid-teens just as he began struggling with his sexuality and his attraction to men. Ali was 'out' to his two adult, married sisters and his father who first found out about his sexuality when he happened upon what must have been highly evocative and

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<sup>37</sup> What is particularly interesting about Saeed's case is his heavy involvement in the scene. He only got somewhat uncomfortable when straight friends of friends who could also be part of other social circles were factored into the mix.

deeply personal love letters Ali had written to one of his male school friends when he was in school. Despite living with his mother since his parents' divorce he was still not out to her or, more specifically, had not explicitly disclosed his sexuality to her. While his sisters initially struggled with news of his sexuality they seemed to have 'accepted' it and have not allowed this disclosure to color or alter their love for him. However, during one lazy, late-night conversation with Ali and Malek, Ali recounted a serious argument he had had with his sister Salma about a year or two earlier that related back to his sexuality. They had argued shortly after Salma had gotten married and after he had noticed her drifting further away from the family (meaning his mother, other sister and younger brother) during the period of her engagement and immediately after her marriage. He said he knew that Salma and his brother-in-law were trying to conceive but felt that she was being consumed by her marriage and, in a way, her husband. After mulling over his feelings and concerns for days he decided to speak with her in the hopes of airing out his thoughts. Salma reacted defensively and, in the heat of the argument, let one deeply hurtful statement escape the censorship of her lips; she told Ali that he could not possibly understand what had to go into making a marriage work or the stresses that came along with the creation of a new family and that he would not be able to understand because he could never have a family of his own. That statement dealt Ali a severe blow and he could not bring himself to speak with Salma for months following this confrontation. Ali was particularly wounded because of the love he felt for his family and his place within it and yet he was being confronted with a strong statement that seemed to signal his fall outside the bounds of this institution. He did not question Sara's love for him or how greatly she admired him but he simply could not ignore the fact that she had tapped into his fear of the future and the potential absence of any family of his own. As Malek, Ali and I sat discussing his feelings about that argument they both seemed to agree that, even if one's family was to 'accept' their homosexuality, it was accompanied by the recognition that creating families of their own in the future would be problematic. Ali then brought up the story of a mutual acquaintance, Hany, to illustrate one's seeming banishment from the realm of 'the family'. Twenty-seven year old Hany was an ultra-liberal dancer and choreographer who came from a family that was almost equally as liberal as he was and seemed to accept



his homosexuality without much fuss. Ali said that, despite their level of acceptance, they had bought a flat for Hany's younger brother but not Hany. They reasoned that they needed to furnish Hany's brother with a marital home but that Hany would not need one since he would not be getting married or raising a family of his own. Hany's parents knew that he had been living in a downtown flat with his boyfriend of two years and accepted their relationship but they still seemed to accord Hany's brother's yet-to-be-formed marital union a different type of value simply because they could not conceive of Hany forming or raising a family of his own outside the heterosexual model.

To come out and state one is gay simply assumes a neatness that cannot be said to be true of almost any person, all subjects must contain within them 'moments of difference' (Moore 1990) and conflict such as the one described above with Saeed and I have attempted to highlight how such 'moments of difference' complicate men's decision to 'come out'.

### **Politicization and Disclosure**

Men's feelings towards disclosure were further complicated when the notion of 'coming out' was infused with political power and integrated into political discourse that presented it as a duty or obligation of sorts. Shadi and Ahmed were clearly presenting a point of view heavily influenced by considerations of political engagement and activism. All of my informants realized and were fully aware of their standing as a minority that was at best ignored and at worst rounded up and prosecuted but they were also aware that it was a minority that could only be viewed as such by those outside it if its members become 'visible'. What Shadi and Ahmed were proposing was the 'politically responsible' decision to 'become visible' so as to then demand rights. We certainly cannot overlook the important role that Western gay liberation discourse plays in promoting this line of reasoning. I must admit that it seemed natural for me to speak about 'coming out' and its political importance with reference to the gay rights movements in the West, particularly the US, when I was speaking with Ali; that said however, this is a reference point to which I think almost all of my informants would point to when discussing their precarious situation in Egypt.

Given that those movements were perceived as the ‘most successful’ worldwide, it is unsurprising that men who have knowledge of those movements and access to the wealth of data available on them turn to those experiences<sup>38</sup> for answers. When I was discussing this notion of looking to those movements for some sort of guidance or ideas that can be implemented in Egypt with Malek the conversation quickly turned to Joseph Massad’s *Desiring Arabs*. Malek was naturally incensed by many of Massad’s claims regarding the gay scenes in cities such as Cairo and Beirut and the charge that certain Euro American gay idioms were picked up by *Westernized* urbanites from the upper classes and, at least it is implied, wholeheartedly embraced by those men. Malek was annoyed and exasperatedly told me that it was of course only natural and expected to look to those movements for tips and ideas simply because, despite their ongoing struggles, they had achieved much of what men in Egypt hoped to achieve. In the Euro American gay liberation movements ‘coming out’ was invested with a great deal of political vigor; it was the opportunity for non-heterosexuals to state their existence so as to then demand rights<sup>39</sup>. I think part of the problem with this discourse when applied to men’s everyday experiences is its dependence on an individualistic form of subject and one that, in the quest for his or her self-actualization and political emancipation, takes the decision to ‘come out’. As I have illustrated however, my informants in Cairo were reluctant to embrace this idea wholeheartedly since the stakes for those men were too high and the place of the appropriate positioning of their sexual subjectivity was being questioned. Unlike the somewhat uncomplicated and unproblematized category of ‘Westernized gay man’ used by Massad the reality seemed to imply that men can be found at the confluence of those varying discourses and are attempting to negotiate their relationship to them.

The politicization of ‘coming out’ can also obscure the fact that subjects are always in flux and that subjectivities are continuously being formed and negotiated through praxis. This is one way in which those instances of ‘coming

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<sup>38</sup> Of course I would not want to flatten the complexities of the different European and American gay rights movements or to obscure their country-specific peculiarities but for the purposes of this chapter I speak of the imagined Euro-American gay rights movement as a whole as it was related to me by my informants.

out' or disclosure need to be further analyzed since they assume a temporally-bounded and unidirectional movement from inside of the closet to outside of the closet. The reality, as I will argue, is that those moments are snapshots but once we place subjectivities in wider processes of practice the true complexity of 'coming out' emerges and we are faced with situations where 'coming out' does not even seem to be a viable course of action.

### **Between Avoidance and Curing: The Elusiveness of Recognition**

To speak of praxis, subjectivities and 'coming out' is to speak of the need for continual recognition. The problem with the 'snapshot' approach to disclosure is that it ignores the fact that, as subjects, recognition is not momentary but continuous and deeply intertwined with communication and praxis. The following ethnographic examples will demonstrate how 'coming out' is essentially a process itself and how, through reactions that involve a great deal of denial and/or avoidance, families in many cases actually 'refuse' to recognize these 'moments of disclosure'.

### **Malek: The Queen of the Scene**

Malek had gotten used to friends jokingly and somewhat affectionately referring to him as the 'queen of the scene' and occasionally to his partner John as the 'king of the scene'. The glittering gatherings and wild parties held at their Mohandessin apartment had gay men scrambling to get in Malek's good graces and on his guest list. The rigid landscape visible through their tenth floor windows, a mix of blues, purples and the splintered glints of brightly lit rooms and roof terraces always highlighted the dramatic double height ceilings in their living and dining areas, a favorite spot among many gay men. After ingesting a few drinks Malek would sometimes even perform a mini-striptease on the mezzanine level above the dancing crowd. He would steady himself using the wooden banister and slowly take off one article of clothing at a time to ever-louder cheers and applause and would only stop short of completely taking his trousers off.

Malek's living arrangement and his level of openness about his sexuality was far from common on the scene and he was considered by most as one of the 'most out' men in the city. He had gradually moved in with John almost a year before I had started research and long before his mother had passed away which was itself rather uncommon. While his family knew about both his sexuality and his partner I will argue that this knowledge did not necessarily mean a complete shift in the way they related to him; through selective avoidance of certain topics and the maintenance of certain expectations with regards to his behavior they were able to maintain a certain ambivalence towards knowledge of his homosexuality. This was especially the case with his mother.

He had grown up in a large family and, as the youngest of nine children, had always felt there was a tremendous and unbridgeable generational gap between himself and his parents. Furthermore, the age gap between him and his five older sisters, the youngest of whom was ten years older than him, meant that he was closer in age to some of his nephews and nieces than his siblings<sup>40</sup>. Malek regularly used his father's extraordinary move from the countryside to Cairo 'without a cent to his name' or any official schooling and building a thriving textiles company<sup>41</sup> as proof of the efficacy of capitalism and, unsurprisingly, he equally as regularly proclaimed himself an ardent capitalist. He had also grown up in a family owned building where he was in regular and close contact with aunts, uncles and cousins.

In March 2010, following John's deportation, Malek had to move in with one of his older sisters, Mai, since his mother had passed away a month earlier. I first met two of Malek's sisters the day I helped him move in with Mai and her family. He was understandably distraught after he had packed away the life he had built with John over the course of two years into multiple suitcases and duffle bags. Once we had finally hauled all of his belongings out of my car, up one flight of stairs and into the room that would temporarily become his we sat outside on the balcony with his sisters so he could tell them what had happened.

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<sup>40</sup> His two older brothers both passed away so, despite having two stepbrothers from his father's other marriage living in Germany, his brothers' deaths meant that he was his mother's only living son (a point she emphasized when she found out he was gay).

<sup>41</sup> Malek still lives primarily off the proceeds from the family business.

As we nibbled on a slice of chocolate and walnut cake that Mai insisted we try Malek told them that he was already making plans to leave the country in case the police came after him. Both Mai and Miriam were taken aback and one of them incredulously asked him ‘leave where? Are you kidding? Leave us?’ and insisted that he would be safe staying with Mai’s family and that it would be stupid to move countries without finishing his undergraduate degree first<sup>42</sup>. Despite feeling a great sense of gratitude for his sisters’ help and their assurances that they would take care of him, he still seemed somewhat unsettled on our drive back to his flat in Mohandessin. Half an hour into the drive he decided to vent his frustration and said that what had bothered him the most about his sisters’ reactions was their disbelief at his desire to move countries with John and their assumption that he belonged in Cairo with them. He then said that they would not have batted an eyelid had the situation been reversed and one of their husbands had had to move countries, in fact, the assumption would have been that the sister concerned would most definitely have to move with him.

Malek’s coming out to his family was a long, drawn-out process and, because of the size of his family, different members found out at different points in time and through one another. He told me several times that, after struggling with his sexuality in private, he had left traces and clues in the hopes that his sisters would confront him. He had for example avoided erasing his browser’s history and had taken every opportunity to tentatively speak about homosexuality. He had even asked one of his sisters, who worked in the travel industry, about Mykonos and when she had asked him if he knew that it was a popular gay travel destination had said that some of his friends had gone and enjoyed it. His response prompted her to suspiciously ask ‘what friends? What kind of friends?’ He was hoping that those subtle references to homosexuality would ease them into accepting his sexuality or the possibility that he might be gay and one could argue that each of those delicate allusions was a form of outing since it opened the space for disclosure.

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<sup>42</sup> Malek was 25 at the time but was completing the final year of his undergraduate degree in business.

He had found it very difficult to accept his own sexuality at first, had slept with women in the hopes of affirming his heterosexuality and, failing to fully banish his attraction to men, had consoled himself with the thought that he may be bisexual. Bisexuality offered him a temporary reprieve from the fears that had troubled him since he had acknowledged his attraction to men whilst still comforting him with the prospect of a happy, settled, heterosexual family at some point in the future. Eventually however, he could not avoid his almost non-existent attraction to women and finally admitted to himself that he must be gay. At that point he began leaving those clues referred to earlier behind and they were quickly picked up on by his nephew<sup>43</sup>. His nephew had caught him masturbating on several occasions and had noticed that he spent long periods of time chatting online. At one of their usual Saturday family gatherings the subject of homosexuality came up once again. His nephew made a snide remark about homosexuality and, unable to contain his annoyance (particularly since he knew that his nephew must have known how much it would hurt him) Malek had retorted with an angry ‘you don’t know how hard it must be’ or ‘how could you judge anyone without experiencing what they must be going through’. Once he realized how emotionally charged his exclamation must have sounded and, realizing that he had made his discomfort and anger more palpable than he had intended, he panicked and stormed out of the room.

Malek did not actually confront his sisters until November of 2007 when he took a trip to the Egyptian Northern Coast with his ex-boyfriend. He had lied and told them he was going with some of his friends from university on a short trip but, growing more suspicious of his behavior, they had called some of his friends who then informed them that they were not with him and had not even planned any trips with him. His sisters called him almost immediately and, after berating him, decided to discuss things once he was back in Cairo. When he eventually spoke with one of his sisters she told him that she had already gone through his computer and had seen what sort of websites he had been frequenting. Malek, unable to tell her he was gay, said that he was ‘bi-curious’ and she immediately said ‘you have to fix this’. Following that conversation with

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<sup>43</sup> His nephew was two years older than him and had moved in with Malek and his mother because of some problems he was having with Malek’s sister.

his sister Malek went through a period of deep depression and tried to date a girl; this was an unsuccessful, short-lived attempt that only lasted for a month or so and sent him back into a state of even deeper depression.

The following confrontation occurred six months after he had started seeing John. John had been clear from the beginning of their relationship about how much time he expected to spend with his partner and told Malek that he expected him to spend, at the very least, every weekend with him at his home in Mohandessin. Throughout that period of time he lied to his sisters and mother and told them that he had a girlfriend living on the other side of the city. They all performed as expected during that period of time; he was almost certain his sisters knew he was seeing a man and simply refused to acknowledge it and were happy to pretend that he was seeing a girl despite the impropriety of an unmarried heterosexual couple spending the weekends together. In the summer of 2008 he finally told them that he had been seeing a man, that he was moving in with him and that they would have to accept his life as it was.

His mother had remained somewhat distant from all this commotion and was only brought in when his brother-in-law decided that it was time to tell her simply to inform her. Malek had been spending his time with John and, after going over all the possible courses of action and stressing over the consequences of each, he followed his best friend's advice and went over to speak with his mother in person. His friend had told him that it was best to be completely honest with her rather than 'break her heart over and over again' by avoiding the topic. Malek had always told me that he was never particularly close to his mother and that she had become somewhat difficult to deal with and very controlling following his brother's death, his father's retirement and once she had gained control over the family's finances. Despite their somewhat unsteady relationship he still felt that he owed her some sort of explanation. She began crying almost as soon as they started talking. He decided to confront her with the simple phrase 'you know'; she attempted to dodge that remark and responded with a 'no, I don't know'. Malek told her that he knew his brother-in-law had discussed his sexuality with her and that there was no point in avoiding it. She was still crying

when she asked ‘my son’s a *khawal*<sup>44</sup>?’ and, bristling at her use of the word *khawal*, he said ‘your son is *mithly*<sup>45</sup>’. She told him that she had wanted to see him getting married and that she had hoped he would have children and a family of his own and asked him if he would just live out the rest of his life alone, as a bachelor. Malek confidently told her that he would not be alone and that he had already met, fallen in love with and was living with a man. After mulling over what he had told her she said she could not accept or approve of it and then went on to avoid the topic of his sexuality for the most part until her death<sup>46</sup>. Interestingly however she always asked after John but referred to him as ‘Mohandessin’. She would usually ask Malek how ‘Mohandessin’ was doing and when he told her once that ‘Mohandessin’ had come down with a cold and was not feeling well she sent him home with a homemade pot of soup. Despite her knowledge of John and their living arrangement she almost never referred to him by name and she never expressed any interest in meeting him.

In a way, Malek had never expected his mother to fully accept or understand his sexuality or its implications for his life choices but he expected his sisters, because of their age, education and upbringing to be a little better attuned to the consequences of his ‘coming out’. This is perhaps why he felt so frustrated by their reactions when he told them he was moving with John or whenever one of them absentmindedly said ‘rabena yehdeek’ (‘may God lead you to the path of enlightenment’) implying that his sexuality will one day change. The complicated relationship that Malek’s sisters developed with the knowledge of his sexuality became even more apparent when I was invited over to one of their Saturday family lunches. Malek had hoped that this lunch would be a good opportunity for me to discuss his sexuality with his sisters but, as the day progressed, his discomfort at broaching the topic with his sisters was obvious and he would even apologize for his inability to talk about it whenever we were left alone. His sister’s flat was a cacophonous mix of chatter, clattering utensils and dishes, the sounds of children playing and the dull racket of a television that

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<sup>44</sup> The Arabic equivalent of ‘faggot’.

<sup>45</sup> A somewhat recent, non-derogatory term for ‘homosexual’.

<sup>46</sup> She only spoke to him again of his sexuality on one other occasion when she tried to gauge his interest in anal sex with women; she had hoped that his attraction to men was in some way incidental and that she only had to point out that anal sex was a possibility with women as well for him to start seeing women again.



had been left on in the background. I met all but one of his sisters that day as well as several of his nephews and nieces, two family friends and one of his brothers-in-law. Even though we had found a quiet corner in one of the sitting rooms and had been joined by a couple of Malek's sisters and two of his nieces who knew of his sexuality Malek still could not bring himself to discuss it openly.

Malek's 'coming out' story highlights the complex nature of the process of disclosure and recognition. Far from experiencing one distinct moment of 'outing', many men, like Malek go through a process where they feel they must maintain a delicate balance between disclosure and non-disclosure. For example, when Malek stormed off the balcony after he had reacted rather aggressively to his nephew's comments he had felt that he had inadvertently let too much slip, threatening the delicate balance between 'coming out' and 'not coming out' that he was trying to maintain. Many men tried to strike such a balance because of the ambivalence they felt towards coming out, their sexualities and their families described earlier but some also feared the denial of recognition that could take place once they had 'come out'. For example, Malek's sisters' reactions to his plans to move countries for John bothered him because it seemed that, despite knowing about his sexuality and his committed relationship, they did not take that relationship as seriously as they would their own or any other heterosexual relationship. Furthermore, it seemed that they were still holding out hope that his sexuality would change one day. For example, his sisters' use of 'may God lead you to the path of enlightenment' assumes or implies that this was a possibility. This was also bolstered by their call to 'Dar al-Iftaa<sup>47</sup>' to ask if his homosexuality could be used as grounds to void his claim to his father's inheritance. His sister's had done it out of fear that his stepbrothers would one day use this argument. 'Dar al-Iftaa' advised them that his homosexuality would not be reason enough to disinherit him since they could not foresee whether or not he would ever become 'enlightened' and renounce his homosexuality. Despite having come out to his family the potential for his future 'enlightenment'

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<sup>47</sup> The primary source of fatwas pertaining to everyday matters. One could either phone in to ask for religious guidance on particular matters or one could even do it through their website <http://www.dar-alifta.org/default.aspx?Home=1&LangID=2>

was ever-present and a barrier to their acceptance or, at the very least, acknowledgment of his homosexuality as a basic fact of his person.

Malek's story was far from aberrant and several other of my informants have recounted similar stories where their parents have willfully ignored or attempted to ignore their sexualities following a confrontation. For example, Hisham, a young professional living with his family in Cairo, related similar events when I asked him about his relationship with his family. He explained how he had come out to his mother following an intense conversation with her about marriage. He was approaching thirty at the time and his mother had confronted him, telling him that she had not pressured or pushed him on the matter for years but that she had felt it was necessary to do so. She had explained that both she and his father were extremely troubled by the fact that it did not seem like he was even considering the possibility of marriage and went on to say that she felt that some sort of action must be taken since they 'could not accept' the fact that he was not even contemplating the idea. When I asked him about the source of their anxieties he explained that it was simply the natural trajectory they had expected for his life; they had thought that they had stayed quiet for too long considering that he had graduated from university eight years earlier.

Hisham went on to explain that he thought his mother might have had some doubts about his sexuality, 'as all mothers do' in situations like these, but that she would have never "had the guts" to confront him. When I asked him how he had actually come out or told his mother about his sexuality he said that it had been a very heated conversation and that it had come out in the heat of the moment. He had said 'there are things that you do not know and it will destroy you if you knew it *fa* (so) please don't make me say it. I'm never gonna get married, I'm never gonna have this normal life, because I'm not that normal'. He explained that his mother had known nothing about homosexuality besides the prohibition against it in Islamic teachings and had assumed that if someone was gay that their sexuality must have been the result of some form of childhood trauma and so she had started asking him if anything had happened to him when he was younger that could have made him that way. He said that the conversation shook his mother to her core and that he had felt quite guilty at the time, feeling

that he had put his mother through undue stress and guilt herself. When I asked him what his relationship with his mother was like following this confrontation he said that it was “fine *elamdullellah* (thank God). She took her time to digest it and to, to...actually not to digest it, to bury it inside her so that she can still be on good terms, not on good terms really, but still to be comfortable and okay with me as we used to without talking about this thing. We do not talk about it. We do not talk about it since that time”.

As Hisham and Malek’s stories illustrate, the ways in which their families chose to deal with knowledge of their homosexuality problematizes how we traditionally think of self-disclosure and coming out. While I would not argue that these moments of disclosure were inconsequential for their dealings with their parents, they did not, nevertheless, entirely alter their intersubjective experiences.

### **Psychiatry: In search of a cure**

Several of the men I worked with<sup>48</sup> had gone to a psychiatrist at one point or another, either of their own volition or at their parents’ orders. Many turned to psychiatrists when they could not cope with the realization that they were gay and the added pressures associated with keeping such a secret while others went with the sole purpose of finding a cure for their homosexuality. Dr. Nabil El Kott, a psychiatrist operating out of a small clinic overlooking the Egyptian Museum in downtown Cairo, is one of only a handful of psychiatrists in Egypt that aim to reconcile men’s conflicting feelings towards homosexuality with their own sexualities and sexual behavior<sup>49</sup>. Dr. El Kott painted a rather dire and depressing picture of the general psychiatric approach to homosexuality in Egypt<sup>50</sup>. A considerable percentage of Egyptian psychiatrists view

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<sup>48</sup> There is an important class element to be considered here since not all men could afford to pay for psychiatric help.

<sup>49</sup> He has told me that for some men reconciling their sexualities with other aspects of their subjectivities involves acknowledging their attraction to men but not acting on them.

<sup>50</sup> The traditional view of homosexuality is that it is a form of *shezouz gensi* or *enheraf gensi* (sexual deviance). Those who still view it this way, which is a large percentage of psychiatric professionals, think that it is abnormal but unchangeable and so they feel that that is all they have to say about it and they don’t try to treat or talk to homosexuals. This group views homosexuality in in this way primarily because their religious beliefs.

homosexuality as a psychological disorder and have developed ‘treatments’ accordingly. Some treatments are aimed at changing one’s sexual orientation (conversion therapy) while others are directed at controlling sexual practices and rely primarily on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Most treatment work is CBT and not conversion even though there are still a few psychiatrists who claim to have successfully ‘converted’ gay men. CBT usually involves avoidance of what are called ‘tools’ which enable men to practice their homosexuality, including homosexual friends or certain places or gatherings. Some treatments also utilize medications that reduce the libido such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and anti-psychotic medication.

While I have met several men who have willingly gone to psychiatrists, Dr. El Kott maintains that gay men generally do not trust the psychiatric community<sup>51</sup>. Furthermore, almost all of the men I have spoken to who have gone to see therapists have spoken of the difficulty of finding mental health professionals who would not try to convert them or cure them. While on the one hand most men I worked with feared and dreaded this psychiatric tradition of pathologizing homosexuality, on the other hand, many parents who were confronted with their sons’ homosexuality sought refuge in the ‘promise of a cure’ proffered by this tradition. Those parents simply refused to believe that their children’s sexualities were unalterable and remained hell-bent on ‘fixing them’.

Haitham was another prominent young man on the scene; despite his young age at the time I started fieldwork (twenty-one) he had already been on the scene for quite some time and many joked that he was battling Malek for the title of ‘Queen of the Scene’. When I started fieldwork he had already begun spending a number of nights a week in a detached house with his boyfriend, a European executive in a multinational company in his late-thirties, in one of the many gated communities on the Eastern outskirts of the city. This two-story house, nestled comfortably in its allotted spot in a winding maze of suburban perfection, was the site of many outrageous gay parties.

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<sup>51</sup> He has said that this is partly due to the social stigma still associated with seeking psychiatric help in Egypt.

Haitham's parents had insisted that he seek psychiatric help when his sister 'outed' him to them. His sister had gone through his laptop and found some files and chat logs that he had saved and taken the information to his parents. His parents took him to see one of the most prominent psychiatrists in Cairo who then passed his case on to one of his promising assistants. On the first visit to the psychiatrist Haitham's parents were told that his homosexuality was a 'problem' but that they should not rush the treatment and that it could take years for their son to be cured. Haitham's parents developed a somewhat strained relationship with his psychiatrist since, as his parents, they expected to be kept informed with regards to his treatment but he still felt the need to maintain a certain degree of confidentiality in order to retain Haitham's trust. They were most frustrated with the psychiatrist's refusal to give them any explicit statements about Haitham's progress in the treatment. For his part, Haitham tried to make use of the psychiatrist's help whilst directing his attention away from his sexuality; for example, he spent a lot of time discussing the difficulties he faced dealing with his mother. Furthermore, he always spoke to us of the fun he had 'manipulating' his psychiatrist and feigning 'progress'. Haitham stopped seeing his psychiatrist in April or May of 2010 after convincing his parents that he had been 'cured'. Whilst pretending to have been cured Haitham continued his relationship with his boyfriend and even stayed over at his house on many occasions but he was careful not to let on to his parents that he had in fact managed to manipulate both them and his psychiatrist. Haitham even went away to Austria with his boyfriend months after he had been 'cured' but devised an elaborate plot involving a work experience program to mislead his parents. In an even more explicit manner of avoidance than Malek and Hisham's cases, Haitham's parents had sought to 'rectify' his sexuality thereby in a way voiding the initial moment of disclosure.

## **Conclusion**

Instances of 'coming out' are 'moments of disclosure' that are both politically and linguistically loaded. They usually take the form of speech-acts and, because they are expectant of responses or reactions from others as forms of recognition,

are infused with a sense of responsibility. The sense of responsibility is two-fold; 'coming out' is undertaken from an impulse to 'become known'; this is usually phrased either as a responsibility to oneself or a responsibility to others (since we must theoretically be sincere in all relations with others; in a way, sincerity is about our 'knowability' to others). Secondly, to 'come out' demands a response/recognition and such demands are usually made out of a sense of entitlement; one only demands recognition once they feel they are deserving of recognition.

The problem men faced was related to the question of whether it was in fact fair to demand a reaction or not. What is the presumed nature of that reaction and how can we separate 'coming out' from the political tradition that has driven it into becoming a 'rite of passage'? For example, Ousama's decision not to 'come out' to his mother was precisely out of a sense of responsibility towards her. Speaking of 'coming out' as a responsibility to oneself and a source of self-worth is ultimately, as men like Ousama have said, selfish. It is not that he felt 'undeserving' of recognition but it was, in a way, an acknowledgement that his mother's response to this act would be equally as central to her intersubjective processes of being; to 'come out' to her was to demand a response that would necessarily involve a break with and in her subjectivity. As such, Ousama would be responsible for this traumatic break.

This crisis of responsibility aside, some men believed in coming out's emancipatory potential. In order to gauge the success of 'coming out' these 'moments of disclosure' must then be contrasted with the periods preceding and following it and how this disclosure has/hasn't influenced the intersubjective experience. Our subjectivities are enacted through practice (in all its forms; embodied, linguistic and so forth) and the way we behave intersubjectively is equally as important as what we know of each other (what we know becomes a backdrop in a sense for what we are continually becoming through practice and performance). The 'moment of disclosure' is a particular communicative moment and one that represents a conveyance of a particular piece of information/knowledge but, given that our relationships with others extend far beyond our knowledge of them, how does this moment structure the relationship

following this speech act? For example, if one censors themselves after such a moment (omits information, if ‘the other’ ignores specific utterances in relation to that person’s homosexuality or, better yet, pretends that one has been cured of his homosexuality) then these silences act as disavowals of the reception of that knowledge. This plunges the efficacy of the original act of disclosure into question and uncertainty. As acting subjects this moment is, instead of being continually reiterated (investing it with its intersubjective creative power) is written over and, instead, assumes an oppressive air. The silence veils a rejection of that knowledge and rejects the production of an intersubjective experience where knowledge of the other’s homosexuality plays any role. In such a situation ‘coming out’ fails as a vehicle for subject-recognition.

Therefore, the ambivalence about ‘coming out’ is a product of conflicting responsibilities and the acknowledgement of one’s place in others’ experiences of their own subjectivities. Of course this is in addition to more concrete effects, such as the effect this would have on siblings’ marriage prospects, gossip about the family and so on. But, if we assume the speech-act remains between two people and no such effects are to take place, then it is the acknowledgement of one’s place within others’ subject-forming processes that becomes central. Using homosexuality to look at how knowledge (and our reactions to them) of others can influence our own experiences of subjectivity can be incredibly fruitful because the reaction to such knowledge really does tie in directly to one’s understandings of their own moral constitution. It is our acceptance of certain types of knowledge about others, mainly what is deemed immoral, that says volumes about our own moralities. For example, when Malek’s sisters tacitly accept his homosexuality what that means for them is that they are the sort of subjects who would tacitly tolerate their brother’s homosexuality and, perhaps, the instinct to hope that he would change is as much about them not wanting to be the sorts of subjects who would accept that as it is about his actual sexuality. If that’s the case then perhaps the problem with ‘coming out’ in this context is that it creates subjects who would ‘tacitly tolerate their brother’s homosexuality’ but falls short of its promise of liberation. The knowledge remains with his sisters, has created fissures within their own subjective constitutions but, in a sense, Malek is denied part of this disclosure’s promise. As a result, ‘coming out’

becomes about the person one is 'coming out' to rather than the person who has initiated the disclosure.

This chapter hoped to highlight the anxieties and ambivalence associated with 'coming out', particularly to family members. I have attempted to do this by problematizing the notion of coming out and describing men's uneasiness regarding their own sexualities and what those sexualities and the choice to disclose them mean for their futures and families. Furthermore, I attempted to highlight how, assuming men make the decision to 'come out' or being 'outed' this disclosure does not necessarily entail the form of recognition that is usually assumed to take place through such outing. What I hoped to highlight was the sense of frustration, anxiety and ambivalence that plagues this notion of coming out and its relation to the family. It is against this backdrop that I would like to position the following chapters in the thesis that address how men attempt to cultivate a queer performative subjectivity and some sense of collective being.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Class, Sexuality and the Community**

She, Al-Qahira (the City Victorious), lies vast and sprawling beneath nebulous billows and tufts of smog, Egypt's widely disparate class structure etched ever so distinctly into her landscape. Meandering boulevards, winding roads and rambling alleyways trace the contours of bare-bricked shantytowns, mini-cities in their own right, that abut, embrace and trickle into upscale residential and commercial neighborhoods such as Garden City and Heliopolis where grinding metal and towering cranes have erected glittering architectural odes to neoliberal reform. Successive eras of economic liberalization that first found form in Sadat's 'open-door' economic policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s and then took ever more grotesque form in Mubarak-era neoliberal policies and privatization programs have seen the near-complete evaporation of the welfare state discourse so central to the Nasserist era. As governmental institutions and state-provided services slipped into disarray we have seen the Egyptian class structure slip into an ever-widening gulf of income disparity. As Nagi and Nagi write, according to a national probability sample of households surveyed in 1995/96, "...the lowest 10% of the sample received 1.7% of the income in contrast to the highest 10% whose incomes amounted to 30.6% of the total. A large difference also existed between the lowest and highest 20% whose shares of income were 5.8% and 46.0% respectively" (Nagi and Nagi 2011). Furthermore, they add that the highest income earners appear to be underrepresented in the survey due to higher rates of refusal to participate in the survey amongst this segment of the population. This survey demonstrates the increased polarization of Egypt's class structure since the comparison of these figures "...with income distribution in 1991 shows...The shares of the poorest 10% and 20% declined by 2.2% and 2.9%...while the shares of the highest 20% and 10% increased by 4.9% and 3.9%, respectively" (Nagi and Nagi 2011).

When I first started fieldwork I had somewhat naively assumed that a shared sexuality among gay Cairenes would entail an increased ability to bridge these class divisions. However, as my fieldwork progressed I became struck with

the gay community's inner fragmentation and the ardency with which, when occasions for cross-class mixing did arise, internal class divisions were upheld. While, as will become clear, my initial speculations regarding increased cross-class interaction did bear out to a limited extent (such as when men drew the most general affinities based on sexuality), such situations involved a complex process of status negotiation and an underscoring of difference as opposed to similarity.

While there is a solid and growing literature on the intersection of and links between capitalism and sexuality, particularly on Western sexualities in the context of late-capitalism (Altman 1971; Weeks 1981), there has been a strong tendency in both academia as well identity politics movements more generally, to present gay communities as though they were to some extent classless. As Heaphy states, "while studies of gay male cultures and scenes discuss these *as* classed, the situated study of gay men's classed identities has barely begun" (Heaphy 2011: 47). Given the ubiquity of class considerations in Egypt and the extent to which such considerations structure the gay world as well as men's experiences of it and its goings-on, concerted attention to such factors is not only important but absolutely vital for an accurate portrayal of the Cairene 'gayscape'. Such an undertaking is even more pressing given the cursory manner with which both, some academic scholarship and mass media pieces have addressed class matters and homosexuality in Egypt. Massad, in his seminal work on Middle Eastern homosexualities and identity categories, has used the category of 'Westernized elites' without problematizing nor attending to the intricacies and difficulties associated with speaking of such assumed subjectivities (Massad 2007) while media news stories and opinion pieces (particularly ones following the 'Arab Spring') have debated the possibility (and then lamented its foreclosure) for gay movement mobilization in the Middle East without addressing divisions within these communities both in terms of class as well as divisions over the perceived desirability and efficacy of politicized action.

In an attempt to address some of these limitations in the treatment and portrayal of homosexuality and the gay community in Egypt this chapter examines and analyzes the ways in which the Egyptian system of social

stratification plays out on and shapes the scene through class and status-based considerations. I am particularly intent on moving beyond simple statements regarding class-based fractures within the community to shed light on the complex ways in which class difference is experienced and negotiated in a situation where an abstract commonality based on sexuality is acknowledged. I will begin with a general overview of the community or gay scenes' historical development and their internal divisions as recounted by my friends and informants before examining the ways in which class-difference is perceived and spoken of by men as well as the perceived stakes at play in situations of class-mixing and the ways in which those color this chapter's theoretical take on class and status. I will finally end with a section on the primacy of private parties and gatherings as spaces where class-based separation is upheld and how the ways in which such gatherings were structured allowed for a certain degree of class insulation.

### **Cairo's Gay Community and its Scenes**

A week into fieldwork I met with Ess to discuss my research and to ask for his help in my efforts to expand my contacts in the community. I had known Ess, a business executive at a family-owned and managed IT company in his mid-twenties, for several years and had previously interviewed him for an earlier research project on young men's experiences with homosexuality in the city. Ess offered a few words of encouragement and some advice before asking if I would like to interview and speak to men from the "lower-classes" as well as the network of informants he was planning on introducing me to. It was then that I first heard of the "downtown scene" and first realized that when men from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds with whom I interacted most extensively spoke of '*the scene*' they used the phrase with varying degrees of specificity with regards to the wider gay community. Ess explained that the oft-used phrase 'downtown scene' referred collectively to a number of places in Cairo's Haussmann-esque downtown area where men from less-advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds regularly met. Ess added that he had never been to any of the coffee shops that together comprised the bulk of downtown scene-spaces, nor had he 'cavorted' through its winding cruising grounds but offered to

introduce me to a friend, Samer, who would be more helpful in that regard. Ess explained that Samer was a "decent guy who just happens to really like men..." hesitated momentarily then added, "...from the lower classes". He then went on to tell me that Samer was one of the most "un-classist" men he knew and that he, Ess, would most likely introduce me to men who were mostly from upper class backgrounds and only rarely interacted with men from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This conversation marked my initiation into the community's internal class structure and system of stratification and was my introduction to the extent to which socioeconomic divisions played such a vital role in the way the community as a whole was conceived and experienced by my informants. Furthermore, this was the first time I became aware of the eroticization of class position among some members of the scene. Ess seemed to imply that Samer was attracted to some men specifically because they were of a different class background. Over the course of the next few months I learned that Samer was far from an aberration and that many men were attracted to men from working class backgrounds as a fetish of sorts. What is important to note however is that this attraction and the cross-class interactions they brought about were almost exclusively sexual. This 'fetishization' of particular classed positions is by no means specific to my informants, for example, Johnson describes how the category 'chav' is becoming both eroticized and commoditized through its representations in the gay media in the UK (Johnson 2008). According to Johnson, specific forms of masculinity and attendant sexual capacities become inscribed onto the category through representation and "...the representation of these *particular* sexual subjects utilizes and reproduces a *general* symbolic economy of class distinctions" (Johnson 2008: 78). While there was clearly no organized gay media of any sort in Egypt, when men such as Samer spoke of their attraction to 'working class' men they seemed to reference an imagined, ideal type associated with the working classes in wider Egyptian media. They imagined them as hyper-masculine and, as several men have told me, a little 'rough around the edges'. What is important to note here however, is that while this chapter argues that class distinctions were heavily guarded in a social sense, men were much more willing to traverse traditional class barriers in sexual contexts. This problematizes the question of class difference on the scene even further but I must underscore that social separation, that is the main focus of this

chapter, was seen as significantly different from occasional sexual liaisons. Among my informants, sex could be seen as transient, without being loaded with any emotional power so cross-class sexual encounters did not seem to threateningly break down class barriers in the same way that friendships and relationships could; the social intimacy and closeness inherent in friendships and relationships is what posed a problem for class-interactions. This is particularly important since there are various approaches to understanding social stratification and the various levels of social distancing resulting from the hierarchical ordering of individuals, groups and social ties and the one I utilize is a relational approach where "...low distances should be assigned between individuals or groups who are likely to be involved in such social interactions as living near each other, seeing each other socially, intermarriage, having friends or relatives in the other group, moving from one group to another, or merely approving of each other" (McFarland and Brown 1973: 227). According to such an approach then, while Samer and other men may engage in sexual activities with men from other classes they are nevertheless thought of as socially distant; class and socioeconomics operate as mechanisms of social distancing even as men engage with each other in activities that would traditionally be considered intimate.

The widely disparate nature of Egypt's structure of socioeconomic stratification was underscored time and time again by various men and, while not offered as justification for intra-community divisions, was offered as an explanation for the current state of affairs. During the third week of fieldwork and over a boisterous dinner at a restaurant in the heart of Cairo's Mohandessin district, a Lebanese friend of Malek and John's, who had invited me out on that particular evening, explained that it was precisely that state of socioeconomic affairs that fuelled his desire to move back to Lebanon. Malek had been telling me of the notorious parties he and John threw at their apartment a stone's throw away from the restaurant and was contrasting them with ones hosted by another couple; he stated that the other couple regularly invited guests from more 'middle-class' backgrounds. Malek's statement was not meant as a disparaging condemnation of those parties but was offered as research data to better acquaint me with the scene's activities and the ways in which house parties, all-too-

important for regular scene activity, were managed. It was then that Baher expressed his desire to move back to Lebanon and explained that, in Beirut, he would have no trouble mixing with the middle-classes (and gave the example of a bartender) and in-fact, that he could be considered a member of the middle-class himself but in Egypt 'middle-class' entailed such a widely divergent set of life experiences that meant his ability to relate to a member of the Egyptian middle-class was relatively curtailed. He went on to explain that to live in Egypt meant one had to interact with the "crème-de-la-crème" of Egyptian society.

This exchange, while indicative of the importance of class considerations to the scene, points to a complex and somewhat problematic understanding of the Egyptian middle-classes. Contrasting his view of the Egyptian middle class with that of the Lebanese middle class, Baher seemed to state rather assertively that there was something particularly unique about Egypt's middle class. It was as though, to his mind, the Egyptian middle class' general standing and estimation had slipped below what he would have commonly associated with an abstract notion of middle class. Considering that my analysis hinges upon certain understandings of how class-based distinctions operate on the scene it is vital that we unpack and further explicate not only Baher's take on the definition of the Egyptian middle or upper-middle classes but also how such distinctions relate back to my informants. The confusion is perhaps a result of how the category 'Egyptian middle class' is commonly used to define widely divergent lifestyles and standards of living. As de Koning writes, "Incomes in the middle class ranged from a few hundred to tens of thousands of pounds per month. This 'middle class' included educated professionals who barely made enough to keep out of poverty. Their financial circumstances did not contradict their middle class identification or the social salience of their education and office jobs. It rather reflected the precarious situation of large sections of the educated middle-class, most notably poorly paid civil servants and unemployed university graduates" (de Koning 2009: 12). De Koning adds that these sharp differences in income, lifestyle and standards of living have become even more pronounced in this age of Egyptian neoliberalism. While I was doing fieldwork it was certainly the case that many people spoke of the middle class as an 'endangered class'; it was as though the polarity of the Egyptian class structure was stretching and straining

the middle class so thoroughly that the hyphenated categories of upper-middle and lower-middle became even more instructive to people's understandings of class than the category of middle class, which seemed to define those floating in a murky pool between the more definitive poles of upper-middle and lower-middle.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the definition of Egyptian middle class is deeply connected to education and to a certain extent family background or social capital (Armbrust 1999; de Koning 2009). While one of the hallmarks of Nasserist reforms was the establishment of freedom of education from primary education through to higher education as an Egyptian birthright, as the state educational system fell into disrepair in the late 1970s and as a private education sector began to boom during the same period it was not enough to assert that one had a degree but the institution at which one was educated (both at school and university levels) became a way of distinguishing between different levels of standing within the middle class. Schools within this private school industry ranged from the ultra-exclusive charging exorbitant amounts in tuition fees to ones targeting larger segments of the middle class (de Koning 2009). Given the complicated ways in which income, occupation, education and family background intersect in the determination of one's, not only class standing, but standing within the middle classes it is perhaps unsurprising that, in terms of my informants, they seemed to represent this same divergence in backgrounds and incomes. That said, however, the majority of them were professionals at banks, multinational companies or medium to large family-owned enterprises. Another large group of my informants were attending private universities at the time of my research.

Over the course of fieldwork I slowly began to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Egypt's class structure had mapped itself onto the scene<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> By scene here I am referring to the gay community as a whole but mostly as it has been recounted to me and experienced by informants from the upper and upper-middle classes. This is definitely not to say that there was not an entirely different scene that they had not been entirely aware of but since this particular scene is my primary 'fieldsite' so to speak I am relaying their experiences of the development of this scene as it is imagined as part of greater whole.

and, through conversations with men, began to realize how the development of the community and its separation into various social pools of scene activity had come to take place. As stated in the introduction, the vast majority of my informants and men on the scene during my period of fieldwork were in their twenties or early thirties so my data is somewhat limited in terms of age-scope and how far back I can trace developments in the community. However, according to 'scene veterans' such as Ali, Sami, a teacher at a private French school in his forties, and Yasser, another executive at a family-owned enterprise in his late-thirties, Cairo's gay community, at least from their own standpoints, in the 1990s was far more homogenous in terms of socioeconomic make-up. They explained that the internet marked a watershed moment in the community's development. Prior to men's access to the internet, the gay community seemed to be much more limited in social scope, with various men learning of its existence and activities through haphazard personal contacts. The introduction of the internet in the 1990s created entirely novel ways of accessing and tapping into this social field; online forums, websites such as [gay.com](http://gay.com) and [gayegypt.com](http://gayegypt.com) as well as chat rooms and online chat platforms such as mIRC became virtual spaces where men who had no prior knowledge of nor contacts in the community could not only find out about its existence but contact and meet other gay men.

Men who were present to witness and experience this social bloom spoke of it as a 'golden age' of sorts, Cairo's gay halcyon days. The fact that this 'gay Egyptian spring' was spurred on by virtual interactions on the world wide web almost guaranteed that most men who gained access to the community, or at least this particular scene, were of certain socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Access to the internet was dependent upon access to expensive desktop computers that, at the time, could only be found either at the homes of the relatively affluent or at educational institutions and public libraries. Once initial introductions and acquaintances were made in one chat room or another relationships then moved offline where a new gay scene was burgeoning.

The nostalgic reverie of scene days long gone described earlier was in no small part fuelled by men's then blissful ignorance of the brutal blow that would be dealt to the community at the hands of the Egyptian state in 2001. As



described earlier in the introduction, the Cairo Vice Squad's crackdown on 'sexual perversion' in 2001 saw Egyptian security forces arrest, physically torture and torment gay men who were then prosecuted in an act of public shaming. The period following the "Queen Boat" saw a community that had blossomed under the auspices of ever wider access to the internet, through a proliferation of internet cafes and a drop in hardware cost, wilt and wither. As men feared further reprisals and further escalations in the state onslaught they avoided hangouts that had organically sprung about the city in the preceding decade and avoided chat rooms and virtual resources that had been used to entrap so many others. During the 2001-2004 crackdown the Cairo Vice Squad used the internet to lure unsuspecting gay men to various meeting points where they were loaded into waiting police vans. The spaces that had once held so much promise for community mobilization had, in the span of a crackdown, become reminders of the community's precarious situation.

Following a social lull in community activity, as men plucked up the courage to resume some scene-socializing and as younger and younger men ventured online, dulling the sharp horror of the 2001 crackdown into the jabs of scary stories and cautionary tales that are told time and time again as distant reminders, the community slowly began coming back to life. That period saw ever greater numbers of men go online in search of a community and, with even wider access to the internet and a proliferation of gay dating websites such as [gaydar.com](http://gaydar.com), [gayromeo.com](http://gayromeo.com) and [manjam.com](http://manjam.com), the scene's current form began to take shape. As many of my informants explained, while the community's size increased dramatically in terms of numbers, men found themselves in pockets of varying sizes in an ever growing fabric of gay relatedness. The relative exclusivity of the internet during the 1990s controlled the growth of the scene as experienced by upper and upper-middle class informants to a certain extent. As the community expanded far beyond these men's immediate socioeconomic circles their sense of community-wide belonging began to wane in favor of a sense of belonging to smaller scenes within the community. It is not that there was no occasion for class-mixing but in terms of association, my informants most often spoke of *'the scene'* as their more immediate network of associations and friendships who met more or less regularly at house parties, gatherings,

support group meetings and at various restaurants, coffee shops and bars in the city. They used the qualifier 'downtown' to refer to what was perceived as a somewhat distinct but not entirely separate or unfamiliar pool of gay activity<sup>53</sup>.

Whenever men spoke of the class forces pulling and tugging at the community, shaping it in ever more complicated ways, most expressed a certain irritation at my initial questioning of class-mixing on the scene. There was a general sense that questioning the extent to which inter-class interaction took place was in some way an accusation of 'classist' disregard for the vast majority of the Egyptian public. It was a few weeks into fieldwork, at small dinner party hosted by Malek in an effort to introduce me to even more men on the scene that I first faced this sense of irritation. It was a lively gathering with a rather eclectic group of guests who milled around in shifting groups and conversations around the open space. Hany, a trained dancer and opera singer, with a dramatic flourish to his speech as well as his hair, was in charge of preparing a vegetarian meal and flitted in and out of the kitchen with a flurry while Dina, a young folklore songstress serenaded the group with racy and scathing ditties passed down through generations of performers. At one point during the evening a young executive, Bassam, asked me what had interested me in the research on the gay scene in Cairo before proceeding to explain that whole concept of a 'gay identity' seemed rather too superfluous to his liking since it ignored all the very real differences in men's experiences of their sexualities. He was particularly incensed that there seemed to be a general tendency to assume that a shared sexuality was enough to override differential experiences of Egypt's class structure, a sentiment echoed by many of my informants following this initial conversation with Bassam.

It was Bassam who, months later at one of our very first support group meetings, proclaimed that he would only become involved in the group if it was a recurrent 'cultural event' of sorts (such as a film or book club) that allowed men to relate to one another beyond their sexualities. He proclaimed that while the men gathered there may have met as a result of their sexual proclivities that was

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<sup>53</sup> There were however times when 'the scene' was used in place of community.

not the reason they got to know one another better nor was it the reason that they had remained friends. Furthermore, during initial discussions of the group's activities or avenues to pursue in terms of group-level action several men said they would like to find ways to help less-advantaged gay youths who may not have had access to proper healthcare or support in emergency situations, such as when their parents found out about their sexualities, Bassam added that even if the group's aim was to support gay youths from widely divergent class backgrounds that men should not fool themselves into thinking that some form of disingenuous, cross-class "social integration" would take place based on sexuality. The room then fluttered in a wave of nods of agreement. I recall finding Bassam's use of the phrase 'social integration' interesting because it seemed to separate the group's sphere of sociality from the sociopolitical realm of identity politics where all these men from disparate class backgrounds could very well be lumped together. Bassam's statement was even more intriguing given the fact that sexual liaisons with men perceived to be from different class backgrounds was accepted but that long-term relationships or close friendships with those very same men would not be as readily accepted. 'Social integration' of the type Bassam was speaking of seemed to relate to particular forms of social intimacy or closeness that could not be sustained due to a shared stigma based on sexuality. Such stigmatization allowed men to relate to other men from different class backgrounds in a very general sense but was insufficient to create a genuine, long-lasting sense of intimacy.

It was not that my informants believed in nor supported the vastly unequal system of stratification prevalent in Egypt; utter disdain was in fact reserved for discussions of the Egyptian upper classes during both the dinner party and support group meeting mentioned earlier, however, it was simply that the identity-politics derived discourse regarding group oneness based on a shared sexuality rang hollow for my informants. Similarity based on sexual difference was not, to their minds, sufficient to bridge a gulf as wide and unmanageable as that created by Egypt's vastly unequal and unjust socioeconomic system. To suggest otherwise would, it seemed, lend credence to the misguided notion that class difference and vast inequality was in fact bridgeable. Implying or supposing such bridge-ability would, to my informants' minds, not only seem

ingenuous but would obscure the extent to which the Egyptian class system was in fact skewed and unjust.

It was against this backdrop of scene/community activity and state of class relations that I conducted fieldwork and against which all arguments and hypotheses regarding class stratification, status and sexuality must be laid out. This section has attempted to highlight the splintering of an imagined community in line with conceptions of class and highlight the problematic, and at times conflicting, views men held with regards to this fragmentary state.

### **Capital, Habitus and the Scene**

I have thus far written of the notion of 'class' without further elaborating on my understanding of it as it relates to the material presented here nor have I explained the concept's analytical function in the chapter. I have thus far used terms such as 'upper class' and 'middle class' as my informants have spoken of them; as categories, imagined and artificial as they may at times may be, that nevertheless indexed real experiences of social distance and closeness based on a system of stratification that men were and have always been deeply imbricated in, in one way or another. This section attempts to move beyond these categories in an attempt to uncover the ways in which 'class', as idea, and 'class separation' were envisioned, lived and promulgated.

'Class' can certainly be a problematic concept to pin down, particularly when, as is the case with my informants, it is used to refer to a wide-ranging variety of attributes and/or relations concurrently. When we speak of class however we are essentially speaking about systems of stratification, about the ways in which groups of people and entire networks of social relations are placed into a hierarchal social order. Of course there are many approaches to the analysis of class and social stratification and when my informants spoke of class they seemed to speak both of socioeconomic difference as well as status; while class is defined in a Marxist sense through a group's relations to the means of production or the means by which wealth is redistributed, Weber expands his analysis beyond the economic realm in his focus on the concept of status groups

as the integral social units among which a certain group consciousness based on lived commonality can arise (Giddens 2006, Nagi and Nagi 2011, Weber 1968). As Nagi and Nagi write, “The incorporation of ‘status groups’ and the symbolic aspects of honor, prestige and authority which define them, laid the conceptual foundations for the interpretation of pluralist multidimensional stratification systems” (Nagi and Nagi 2011). In my analysis I turn to Bourdieu’s conceptualizations of class and stratification as a means of bringing together both economic and status related factors in practice and lived experience in our understandings of class difference. Through his explication of stratification in terms of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital Bourdieu attempts to highlight how class position is essentially always determined by varying combinations of these elements or forces (Bourdieu 1984). In utilizing Bourdieu’s approach to class through an understanding of different forms of capital I am following in the footsteps academics such as McDermott and Johnson who are attempting to reincorporate class into studies of sexuality (Johnson 2008, McDermott 2004).

If we are to attempt to reconstruct men's understandings of and experiences with class matters we must find a way to dissect and inspect the ways in which the notion of class is continually constituted, reconstituted and imagined in action as well as in reflexive statements made by informants, such as those pertaining to class-mixing, integration and class positions relayed in earlier sections. As Bourdieu writes, "...one must return to the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle, i.e., class habitus, the internalized form of class condition and of the conditionings it entails" (Bourdieu 1984; 101). It is only through such an examination that we can arrive at what Bourdieu calls;

"...*objective class*, the set of agents who are placed in homogenous conditions of existence imposing homogenous conditionings and producing homogenous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices; and who possess a set of common properties, objectified properties, sometimes legally guaranteed (as possession of goods and power) or properties embodied as class habitus..." (Bourdieu 1984; 101)

If we use Bourdieu's understanding of stratification we find that persons considered socially-close in class terms, meaning those sharing similar positions or relations to others in a system of stratification, share similar arsenals of capital (which Bourdieu separates further into economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital) as well as shared internalized structures of dispositions, or habitus, that is both structured and re-structuring through action. If we first look at the first half of this notion of stratification and distinction, that pertaining to capital, in relation to my material we find that when men spoke of class they certainly held a similar, complex understanding of their relations to such various forms of capital. Furthermore, in their conceptualizations of a wider class structure, played their own capital arsenals off against one another's in attempts to gauge, explicate and cement their, as well as others', positions within this system of stratification. As with Bourdieu's notion of habitus, I would not argue that such mental formulations which find expression in action, are either fully internalized and unconscious nor entirely self-aware.

Sometimes capital related considerations were bandied about in an informal, offhanded manner, as when, for example, Ess described Samer as a "decent guy" or when men spoke of their own or others' backgrounds with the oft-used phrase "*ibn nas*" (son of {good} people). Both 'decent guy' and '*ibn nas*' in this context imply a certain combination of capital resources that, whilst perhaps involving some degree of economic capital consideration, index quite more explicitly social, cultural and symbolic capital. To use the term '*ibn nas*' is to tacitly point towards a particular person's position within a particular kin social network and its attending and widening social relations of varying intimacy and ones linking various other kin networks. The implication of 'good people' references said networks' symbolic capital in the form of reputation or status (in terms of perhaps power or moral standing), which in turn is translated into an assumption of a certain repertoire of cultural capital since the all-too-often underlying assumption of such statements is to signal that the person in question has been inculcated with the correct dispositions expected of his background. At another point during fieldwork Malek stated that certain group of men we knew were 'more middle class' and when I urged him to qualify his

statement he simply stated that during a game of charades, for example, they were more likely to use Arabic films as opposed to Western ones. In this case Malek used those men's perceived repertoire of cultural capital to make a statement regarding their class positions and tacitly contrasted theirs to those of an upper class where references to Western cinema were more common and more readily available to its members for citation even if only for a game of charades.

The importance of cultural capital is perhaps best illustrated through an examination of men's use and command of foreign languages, particularly English, and the ways in which fluency in English and modes of relating in foreign languages were used as signifiers of elevated class position. As de Koning explains, "The 'possession' of foreign languages, particularly English, has come to denote a major split within society. It divides the educated middle class between those 'with' split and those 'without' language; between those who attended...language schools, can look forward to working in the upper segments of the labor market, and are generally born and bred in 'better' families, and those who are none of these things...(who do not have a language)" (de Koning 2009: 60)<sup>54</sup>. Among my informants distinctions relating to the command of the English language not only separated those who possessed such linguistic abilities from those who did not but also between those who had attained variable levels of fluency in the language. Command of the English language therefore became a loaded signifier of class standing; the ability to express oneself in a specific way in English became a signifier of whether or not a person belonged to one's social class. For example, time and time again my informants complained and at times joked about the proliferation of Arabic language profiles on popular dating websites. This proliferation was usually linked to the expansion of access to the

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<sup>54</sup> For a linguistic ethnography of the use of Arabic language in Egypt and the division between the use of Classical Arabic and colloquial Egyptian Arabic see Haeri 2003. Furthermore, in an article Haeri explains how in Egypt, classical Arabic's (as opposed to colloquial spoken Arabic) added value to one's cultural capital has diminished and, as a result, education in Classical Arabic is no longer regarded as highly as nor is it pursued as seriously as foreign languages by members of the middle and upper classes (Haeri 1997). Haeri explains that "One cannot get a mid-level or low-level job as a government clerk without a certain level of proficiency in the official language, but one can get a diplomatic post, since it comes with a secretary who knows the official language" (Haeri 1997: 804).

internet to ever wider segments of the Egyptian population; while access to the internet was arguably still limited to what we would consider the 'middle classes' a person's language choice became a marker of their position within this ill-defined pool where use and command of English signaled an affinity to the upper end of the middle class. An example of a time when such discussions of class standing and language use came up on the scene occurred when Malek, Bassam, Hisham and a couple of other men went for a walk on Kasr El-Nil bridge, a cruising spot associated with the lower-middle and lower class gay scene. Bassam was telling me that he sometimes found himself attracted to men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and used language as a qualifier for how he defined class standing. When I asked him what he meant by 'lower class' he simply said 'they don't speak English for example'. Moments later one of the men brought up dating profiles written in Arabic and referred specifically to one where a man had written " *'awez wahed beyheb el mas 'ashan 'elaqit mas*" ('I want someone who likes to get sucked for a sucking relationship') in Arabic. At the time all the men had laughed in a nonchalant manner but when I interviewed Hisham at a later date the true complexity of his feelings towards how language was used as a marker of class identity came into focus. During the interview Hisham lamented the depreciation in esteem of the Arabic language before somewhat exasperatedly stating that he himself judged others and their class backgrounds according to their command of the English language. He had slapped his hands together in frustration as he described how he found the use of Arabic in the bedroom a turnoff. He repeatedly expressed his annoyance with himself but said he just could not logically explain his reactions or judgmental attitudes; he simply stated that it had somehow become ingrained in his view of the classed Egyptian social sphere.

While the examples given above demonstrate the ways in which capital considerations filter into day-to-day, informal conversations there have been many times where such considerations were pointed to rather explicitly by my informants. As stated in the preceding chapter on 'coming out', family and disclosure, social and symbolic capital costs are at the forefront of discussions regarding 'coming out' and the potential loss of prestige, power, friendships and acquaintances both on the individual as well as familial levels. Men told stories



of how certain relatives' marriageability could be placed in jeopardy if word of their sexuality were to get out or discussed in detail how others' family reputations had been ruined and social relations actually severed as a result of men's indiscretions, a matter which will be discussed in greater detail in following sections.

While such matters pertaining to economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital were discussed or alluded to on a regular basis, what I found most striking was the pertinence of Bourdieu's concept of habitus to my research material. More specifically, the idea that habitus is embodied and played out on the social scene by classed subjects allows us to view class as always, not only at play, but inscribed in action as well. As Bourdieu explains;

"As an acquired system of generative schemes objectively adjusted to the particular conditions in which it is constituted, the habitus engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others" (Bourdieu 1977; 95)

Habitus locates individuals within a system of social stratification through its inculcation of those individuals into particular, embodied and classed manners of relating to the world. It represents the ways in which structures of distinction and class-related classification find expression in embodied action by virtue of which a structure is able to reproduce itself to some degree or another but, as with any form of action, such structures are still negotiated and altered in their transformation in praxis. While, as stated earlier, I do not agree entirely with Bourdieu's assertions of habitus' internalized nature, particularly since, as is the case with my informants, non-normative factors unaccounted for (such as homosexuality) do in fact alter individuals' subjective trajectories, I do nonetheless find the concept pertinent to my analysis of class relations and interactions. Through an incorporation of habitus into our analytical schema we can begin to view class as a lived and living, organic construction where embodied subjectivities conditioned by varying capital make-ups inhabit as well as create their surroundings. I find it particularly useful since, when my informants spoke of class and class difference in actual day-to-day interactions,

they used embodied practice (gestures, clothing, gait and movement) as indicators of classed positions. More specifically, and in the hope of tightening my argument, I would like to focus particularly on the way in which flamboyance, or an ability to tame one's flamboyance, was used to speak of and assess others' class positionalities.

### **Class and Flamboyance**

The phenomenological conceptualization of class and classed subjectivity endemic to the notion of habitus rang true to my informants' experiences of class positions during the first few weeks of fieldwork. During the dinner with Malek and Garret's Lebanese friend mentioned earlier, for example, Malek and John attempted to explain to me how truly vital class was for people's experiences of the social world as well as the urbanscape. They explained, as an example, how one's choice to use particular landmarks whilst giving directions was dependent upon the person one was giving directions to; if one was discussing directions with class peers they were most likely to use upscale restaurants, coffee shops, stores etc... as landmarks, places their interlocutors would have first-hand experience with while giving the same directions to a cab driver they said would probably end with them driving in circles and no where closer to their destination. Throughout the period of fieldwork I became increasingly aware of how men implicated class in their assertions regarding their own behaviors and those of others and found that, whilst men did not regularly discuss the behavior of others thought to be of higher class standing, they regularly spoke of those of a perceived lower class standing and, in most cases, used criticisms of flamboyance, brashness and vulgarity as the means to 'class' both themselves and others through such exchanges.

Malek and Garret's explanation into the ways Cairenes' perceptions and conceptualizations of the city were very much colored and influenced by class positions and the 'lifestyles' such positions seem to foster seems to fit in rather comfortably with Farha Ghannam's discussions of mobility, liminality and classed bodily hexis in Cairo (Ghannam 2011). In an article, Ghannam discusses how mobility and movement through the Cairene urbanscape opens up spaces for

the creative fashioning and refashioning of embodied class habitus for her informants from a low-income neighborhood. As such, this sphere of mobility represents a liminal space where her informants could utilize the various forms of capital available at their disposal to negotiate their status and class positions vis-à-vis other urbanites they encounter. Moreover, this movement amongst Cairenes from varying class backgrounds allows her informants to cultivate various forms of aspirational cultural capital that is then put into play in this process of habitus fashioning. The reason I find Ghannam's work so useful is that hones in on Bourdieu's notion of bodily hexis in order to explain how status and class are perceived and negotiated in situations where another person's class position can only be gleaned through their practice and physical presentations of such position. This is especially relevant to my fieldwork since my informants used similar understandings of status and embodiment when discussing class. For example, when I went cruising on foot with Malek on Kasr-el-Nil Bridge one evening, he commented on and half joked about how we would have to make an effort to fit in with our surroundings. He first pointed out how odd our walk on the bridge would have seemed to our acquaintances outside of the scene had we been spotted since Kasr-el-Nil excursions were most often associated with Cairenes from low-income backgrounds who would not necessarily be able to afford the exorbitant cover charges charged by the establishments he frequented. He then joked that I should play some Arabic music loudly on my cell phone to fit in or that we should walk down the bridge linking arms, making a reference to the way Egyptian men perceived to be from lower socioeconomic backgrounds regularly walked arm-in-arm down the city's streets. While Malek's suggestions were only uttered in jest they, nevertheless, pointed to the ways in which class was inhabited in practice and the ways in which such embodied practices could then be read as markers of class position in the process of status negotiation discussed by Ghannam. As explained earlier, such embodied practices cannot be entirely divorced from our understandings of cultural capital since employing particular practices is essentially about employing one's knowledge of and proficiency in such capital to present class-specific forms of bodily hexis that can then be read and registered by others as statements of status. Malek's suggestion that we play Arabic as opposed to English music would then be an attempt at mimicking a practice associated with particular classes and using a form of

cultural capital that is as similarly associated with those very same classes. This discussion therefore highlights the instrumental role played by habitus and its embodiment to men's understandings of class and the ways in which they negotiated their status and class positions vis-à-vis other gay men and Egyptian society at large.

When men, particularly those who described their backgrounds as middle or upper-middle class, spoke about their very first interactions with the scene many of them expressed an initial sense of shock at and aversion to the pockets of gay activity they had found themselves in. When pushed to explain further they mostly explained that they had somehow found themselves socializing among men from lower class backgrounds. When pushed even further regarding what, in particular, had irked them about the sub-scenes they had found themselves in, they simply explained that men had been effeminate to the point of flamboyance. Their general descriptions of the events in question amounted to statements regarding how dissimilar they and the men they had met had been in terms of classed habitus. Among men who identified themselves as members of the upper or upper-middle classes there was a general perception that flamboyant dress in particular, such as colorful, tight-fitting pants and shirts, were indicative of a lower class social position. This was in part explained away in terms of a locally-inscribed sense of fashion and dress and, in part, attributed to those men's dulled awareness of the flamboyance of their dress. According to informants who had found such behavior unpalatable, such disregard for self-fashioning and image management, indexed a lesser degree of attentiveness to one's status, social standing and reputation, factors which they, as members of the 'upper classes' were keenly aware of.

Such views were by no means limited to men who identified themselves as members of the upper classes. Shamel, an aspiring actor I had met on the 'downtown scene', warned me countless times during our excursions in El Borsa and Korba areas to avoid certain groups of men or particular coffee shops in the downtown area because of their clientele. One evening he pointed to the coffee shop where we had met on my first night in El Borsa and said, 'I've stopped going there because the clientele there is no longer what it used to be'. I urged

him to explain what he meant and he simply said they were "over" (meaning over the top) and flamboyant and that it was only a matter of time before other coffee shop patrons would lose their patience and force the owners to get rid of their gay customer base. I pushed him even further and asked him what he meant by "over" and his allusions to flamboyance in the hopes of initiating a deeper discussion of the question of flamboyance but he simply said that he had meant they were "low class".

On another occasion, Shamel and I rode together from Tahrir Square to the Korba area of street side cafes and restaurants for Ramadan *sohour*, the pre-dawn meal before the beginning of the daily fast. Throughout the month of Ramadan a small stretch of road, flanked on either side by small coffee shops, kebab shops and fast food restaurants would erupt in a boisterous flurry of scene activity. Long after 'downtown scene' coffee shops had closed (sometime between one and two in the morning) the scene would shift to tram-lined Korba where gay men stuck to one end of the road, congregating in large groups, feasting on a mishmash of dishes purchased from any given number of the aforementioned eateries. It was there that Shamel issued one of his characteristic warnings against socializing with particular men, pointing at a trio of young men who seemed to be wearing thin layers of foundation and the slightest hints of lip gloss.

If we return to Bourdieu's explication of capital and habitus we find that his approach to stratification may shed some light on the reasons for my informants' aversion to flamboyance. As suggested earlier, the assumption behind men's association of an overtly flamboyant habitus with a lower class background may have been based on assumptions regarding value and habitus control. A cavalier and uncaring attitude regarding how one presented oneself in public was assumed to index one's disregard for both social and cultural capital maintenance. Whenever the issue of class difference and flamboyance was broached with my informants *not* from the 'downtown scene' they spoke of the downtown area's flashy irreverence for propriety and qualified those men's behavior by saying 'they had less to lose' in terms of social contacts and prestige. Flamboyance as an aspect of a certain habitus associated with the field of

sexuality was thereby classed; it was thereby associated with ideas regarding lower class dispositions and contrasted with an elevated concern with keeping one's outward behavior in check( regardless of one's actual position, flamboyance was associated with a class assumed to be lower than one's own in the structure of stratification).

This general framework for analyzing men's conceptualizations and assessments of flamboyance in relation to class considerations is further complicated by the fact that affected flamboyance and effeminacy is used by men from all socioeconomic backgrounds in the context of a scene-specific habitus that is cultivated in the quest for some sense of communality. While, when men criticized the flamboyance of others they were in a sense critiquing others' perceived disregard for certain generally accepted rules of propriety, one of the things that struck me the most during fieldwork was precisely how the same sort of irreverence and disregard for propriety and heteronormativity was celebrated at other times as a celebration of the gay scene. The use of *enti*<sup>55</sup> *language*, the scene practice of linguistic gender-inversion, as well as the accepted practice of embodying a hyper-feminized form of habitus on the scene and the exchange of ritual insults and banter (discussed in greater detail in chapter six) unequivocally point to the cultivation of certain forms of flamboyance for the purposes of fomenting a sense of groupness through praxis. What appears to separate such forms of improvised flamboyance from the type of flamboyance spoken of disparagingly is that the former was envisioned as contrived and artificial while the latter was considered indicative of one's *actual* class standing. The former form of flamboyance could therefore be thought of as a scene-specific form of cultural capital to be cultivated and put into play whenever appropriate while the latter was considered less a form of capital and more a binding disposition.

I would argue that the reason such a distinction is of such vital importance to my informants is because the space of such a distinction is the liminal space

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<sup>55</sup> *Enti* is the Arabic feminine pronoun 'you' and *enti language* is used to refer to phenomenon of the use of slang and gender-switching explored further in chapters five and six.

where status positions are negotiated in situations where men's gay and non-gay worlds collide. Scene-specific flamboyant praxis is therefore thought of as appropriate for situations where the supremacy of the scene is underscored and where men's engagement in such practices is of no real threat to their reputations or standing beyond the scene but once such status beyond the scene comes into play then it is vital to separate those who can learn to tame and control this zest for flamboyance from those who cannot. An example of the need for such levels of control can be demonstrated with an example from one of the many times I have gone out with large groups of my informants. One afternoon, a few days into the 2010 FIFA World Cup matches, I met up with a large group of gay men for lunch at Tivoli Dome, a large, then relatively new, commercial development comprising several eateries and coffee shops. We sat close to large, floor-to-ceiling sheets of glass overlooking the expansive courtyard with its water features, flashy point-of-sale advertising and an enormous screen playing the World Cup soccer match being broadcast at the time. The ten of us, nine men and one straight girl, only barely managed to fit along one long table bisecting the top floor of the restaurant. Some of us sat on upholstered benches running down the full-length of the table and the rest on somewhat less comfortable chairs along the other sides. One could hear the loud crackling of laughs woven through strings of witty repartee ring throughout the restaurant the restaurant, the sort of laughs men jokingly referred to as 'dehk beyoot el de-ara' ('whore house laughter').

Those exchanges were practically yelled out across the table in an effort to make to battle the background noise. Using gay slang, feminine pronouns and drag names quite comfortably and in highly stylized gestural productions the overall scene was one of flamboyant femininity. At one point Dalia, the only girl at the table, turned to Haitham with a contemplative look and stated that he didn't seem particularly gay. A remark made more ironic by Haitham's undisputed place on the scene since his mid-teens and the fact that he had only a few moments earlier been telling Malek about his humorous and devious plans to seduce some of his sexually frustrated, straight colleagues at work. Dalia's comment instantly grabbed everyone's attention and almost every single man at the table asked "Eih?!" (What?!) and Gigi incredulously exclaimed '*Fawahesh?!'*

using Haitham's drag name (which roughly translates to 'debaucherous sins'). Karram, Malek's cousin, who happened to be sitting at the other end of the table, then raised one hand to his mouth and asked "Azaghrat?!" ('Shall I ululate?!')<sup>56</sup> and, almost immediately, several of the men began to jokingly ululate ending in another bout of 'whore house laughter'. Throughout the course of our meal a few of the other patrons would shoot awkward glances in our direction. Those pointed looks were quickly noted by men and just as quickly discounted. Not only were men keenly aware of the attention they were attracting and the feelings of shock they were stirring, they actually relished the effects of their behavior. It was a statement of presence and, more specifically, a statement of presence together as a group.

About an hour and a half into our meal the men made a conscious effort to tone down their behavior since Malek had become visibly uncomfortable after seeing two of his straight acquaintances at a table by the windows. As soon as the young couple walked in Malek sank a little into his seat and, almost squirming, said that running into people he knew was the reason he hated going out in that neighborhood where he had grown up and where his family still lived. He asked the men to tone down their behavior a little bit. The men nodded, mumbled that they understood and tried to oblige but Malek still got uncomfortable and glanced nervously at the couple's table whenever the men got a little loud.

It was only when Malek began to worry about his standing and reputation beyond the scene, as well as his family's, that the flamboyance that had just been on display for all to see was seen as potentially damaging. This ethnographic scenario was far from uncommon and was played out time and time again with little variation over the course of fieldwork; situations where men found themselves in a liminal space where both their gay lives and their lives beyond the scene merged in unsettling ways. Such situations further demonstrated the complicated ways in which class and praxis are mutually constituted and the

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<sup>56</sup> Ululation is a practice reserved almost exclusively for women and is used as an expression of joy at weddings, engagements or whenever there is piece of very good news.



ways in which various forms of capital, habitus and men's sexuality relate to one another and shift through interaction.

### **Private Spaces and the Construction of a Classed Scene**

The community's internal stratification and its fragmentation along class lines was perhaps most acutely felt in the relatively private sphere of house parties and gatherings. Given the fact that such gatherings were routinely held at homes and, on some rare occasions, venues rented exclusively for the purposes of such events, access was much more heavily policed for class homogeneity than at scene hangouts or cruising areas. This section examines the role played by class considerations in the planning and experience of three such parties in order to, not only present the ways in which internal class divisions were upheld in the private sphere, but to also argue that decisions to uphold such divisions were in large part driven by considerations of status and class standing as they related to an imagined, 'classed heterosexual sphere', one that existed beyond but not entirely separately from the community or its classed scenes. As Malek's run-in with some of his acquaintances from beyond the scene has demonstrated, the 'gay world' did not exist on a detached social plane where what happened on the scene could stay on the scene, rather, men's lives on the scene were constantly being ground and minced in with their social selves beyond its social confines and so questions of internal social stratification were almost always bound up with understandings of their class standings beyond the scene.

Two of the parties I will discuss here fell on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2010; I had been invited to two different, scene-related parties and, unsure about which would yield better data for my research, had decided to attend both. I had met quite a few men during the first two months of fieldwork but had, up to that point, deferred to Malek for decisions relating to scene events. However, since Malek, John and several of their closest friends had made plans to spend New Year's Eve and the first week of January in Beirut I found myself venturing into those parties without my closest contacts on the scene.

My first stop that evening was at a party thrown by a couple I had met through Malek and John earlier in the year. Mohamed, a university student in his early twenties, and Mohamed, an architect in his early forties who had only just recently moved back to Cairo after years spent living in New York City had already been dating for several months at the time of the event. The party was thrown at the home of one of Mohamed's closest female friends, in one of Cairo's most affluent and highly-regarded neighborhoods and in one of the neighborhood's most esteemed apartment blocks. When I was invited by Mohamed he mentioned that he had invited other gay men but that the party would be a mixed affair and that he, his partner and their friend, Soheir, were going to be particularly selective with their guest lists. I arrived to the humming and buzzing of celebratory activity a little after ten with my friends Ana and Gabriella in tow. Ana, one of my departmental cohorts at LSE, and her sister Gabriella, had arrived in Cairo a few days earlier for a short break and were immediately welcomed into the dimly-lit flat by Mohamed. He wished us an excited Happy New Year before taking us on a whirlwind tour of Soheir's sitting areas where the party was quickly unfolding amidst technicolored gusts of papery streamers. As we wove our way through party chatter and the bong, boom and crackle of music we were handed metallic party hats in brilliant greens, reds and blues before being pointed in the direction of a bar where tens of bottles of alcohol stood amongst trays of canapés and nibbles.

It only took one cursory survey of the dimly lit sitting areas and makeshift dance floor for me to realize that this particular party was markedly different from all other scene-related events I had attended up to that point of my fieldwork. While many gay men milled around and interacted rather comfortably with one another, there was an equal if not greater number of straight men and women moving around, dancing and socializing. Most parties I had attended on the scene prior to this one and almost all parties I have attended since have been much more exclusively gay. Furthermore, as I glanced around the party and its swaying guests it became clear to me what Mohamed had meant to say when he had spoken to me of their selective invitee list; he and his partner were perhaps not as interested in throwing a 'gay party' as they were in putting together an occasion for both gay and straight friends and acquaintances from more or less similar and

particular class backgrounds but where gay men invited could behave comfortably and relatively openly.

As the minutes ticked by and down to midnight and as more guests trickled into the party I found myself seeing fewer and fewer gay men and became increasingly worried that I may have in fact made the wrong decision stopping by Mohamed's party first. I was worried that Haitham's party on the outskirts of the city was more of 'scene event' and that I had effectively missed an important opportunity to learn more about scene parties. So, a little before two in the morning, Ana, myself and Gabriella made our apologies to Mohamed, his partner and Soheir before heading off to Haitham's.

Haitham's party was being held at his partner's detached house in a gated community on the Eastern outskirts of the city. While Haitham still lived with his family about a thirty minutes' drive from his partner's home, he spent a considerable amount of time at his Austrian boyfriend's home so men regularly referred to his partner's house as Haitham and James'. By the time we made our way through their front door, the party had already started to fizzle out with only twenty or so gay men shooting and flitting from one corner of their living area to another in various states of intoxication. Since the party had effectively ended by the time we arrived, we were only able to stay a little under an hour so it was not until two weeks later that I learned of events that had transpired over the course of the party. Michael, one of Haitham's closest friends, took it upon himself to inform both myself and Malek (upon his return from Beirut) about the scene's latest New Year's Eve 'drama'. Huddled around Malek and John's dining table, George launched into an animated retelling of the night's events. Haitham had apparently thrown the party with a female friend of his and had in part done so to split the costs of the party and in part to ensure that the event was a bustling bevy of activity. Michael explained that the party was in fact a huge success, that huge numbers of men had turned up and that it had even felt at some points that over a hundred people had turned up. At one point in the evening and as Haitham grew increasingly more uncomfortable with the number of guests in James' home he realized that he had not invited a large number of those in attendance and that it was his friend who had invited many of those men and that they had in turn

invited some of their friends along. With his hands flying wildly before his face, Michael explained that this girl had invited all those people without consulting Haitham and that those invited "...weren't good people...". I decided to question what Michael meant by "...weren't good people..." and after several muted half-utterances, equally uncertain, furtive glances and a moment's hesitation he let out an exasperated "*bee'a mil akhir*". The term *bee'a* was commonly used to refer to what were perceived to be undiscerning tastes and was used in reference to both fashions as well as general dispositions so, in this particular context, Michael meant to say that he (as well as Haitham and their other friends) had felt that those other men in question were of a lower class background.

George went on to explain that Haitham had grown increasingly agitated over the course of the night and that he had eventually resorted to ruthlessly kicking people out of the party. Haitham's friend was infuriated by his actions and, once she had realized that he had started asking her friends to leave, had bounded over to him, demanded that he stop and insisted that he had no right to ask people she had invited to leave. After a short argument she started packing up all the things she had brought and made to leave in an angry huff. Michael admitted that she had in fact brought many party supplies, including a few bottles of alcohol. He chewed on and savoured every little tidbit of gossip as he described how the girl had shuffled awkwardly through the room, clutching and hugging various bottles of alcohol while unconcerned and uninterested gay men stepped on the train of her dress, adding tiny trips to her fuming stride. George said that the evening's drama came to a crashing, shattering end as Haitham's friend either threw or dropped one of those prized bottles onto the floor as she left the party.

The last party I would like to write about before delving into an analysis of what these three events could tell us about class dynamics and the scene was held at Malek and John's flat on one Cairo's 'dry nights'. 'Dry nights' were those nights when restaurants, bars and other establishments were legally forbidden from serving alcohol to Egyptians because of their Islamic, religious significance. Since most men were hard-pressed to find establishments willing to

defy the law parties held on such nights were particularly well attended and regularly rolled on to the wee hours of the following mornings. I was over at Malek and John's flat a week before the party as two men teetered precariously above their living room hanging up two massive, disco balls in preparation. Malek began to discuss his plans for the party with me and insisted that I invite certain of my straight friends from outside the scene. He watched as I typed each of them a message inviting them and informing them of the night's details. Malek looked somewhat perplexed and uncomfortable as he explained that he had questioned whether or not to invite some of our more flamboyant friends to the party. He went on to say that he had intended to throw this as a 'mixed' party and had been intent on making sure that none of those gay men invited would make any of his other friends uncomfortable or conform to negative stereotypes of gay men so he did not want "silly queens" running around the party.

A little later that night we met up with several of Malek's friends at a teeming downtown bar. As we stood chatting and drinking under upturned, deep green, bottles of Stella beer that had been banded together into kitschy chandeliers Malek started discussing his party plans once more. He asked Omar, a professor at a reputable private university, if he had invited people to the party, to which he responded by handing his phone over to Malek and telling him to type out whatever message he wanted to send out. Once he had typed out the invitation Malek spent ten minutes going through the phone's list of contacts with Omar and inviting people. Invitations sent out, Malek then started discussing his plans once more and how he wanted to invite a certain 'type of gay boys' to the party and that he wanted to ensure that certain other types were not invited. When Omar enquired as to what types of gay men were not welcome at the party Malek became visibly uncomfortable, hesitated then stuttered before saying, with an obvious note of frustration, that he was not "classist" but that he did not want men from Shobra, a working class neighborhood of Cairo, to show up at his doorstep. Omar laughed before telling Malek that he basically wanted to "create a bubble" and then one of them added "a safe bubble".

When I arrived at the much-anticipated party a few days later, I arrived to deep, pounding music and the sight of flashing, fluorescent beams of pink, red

and yellow that crashed into the suspended disco balls before splintering into tiny glimmers and glints of light to be hurled in all possible directions. While only around twenty or so people were milling around the expansive living area when I first arrived the place soon became a heaving mass of activity. Malek seemed pleased enough with the turnout but complained that not as many straight men had come and that those attending were mostly gay men and straight women, as was usually the case with most scene parties. Nevertheless, he excitedly danced and threaded his way through the crowd into the early hours of the morning.

At one point in the evening I bumped into a man, Selim, whom I had met previously. He was sitting by himself on one of the sofas on the candle-lit mezzanine floor overlooking the party buzz, looking somewhat forlorn. As we started talking he explained that he had fallen in love with a man during a recent trip to Barcelona but had had to break off their relationship when he returned to Cairo. He leaned into the banister and glanced at the partying crowds before saying “*rege’et lil khara dah*” (I came back to this shit!). He then added that he could not even go downstairs and attempt to enjoy the party because he had spotted several girls he had gone to university with and insisted that he would not have come to the party had he known it was going to be ‘mixed’. He spent the rest of his time at the party flitting from one hidden corner to another before calling it a night while the party continued to seethe with excited activity and as it whittled down to a handful of guests at around six in the morning, those still present felt confident in declaring the party a resounding success.

These three parties represent three separate cases where access to private scene spaces was heavily guarded, restricted and policed. In Mohamed and Malek’s case, they were keen to ensure that those invited to their parties in the first place would fit particular classed expectations while, in Haitham’s, the classed fashioning of private space took place once the party was already underway and upon the realization that people who did not fit similarly classed expectations had found their way into the party. In order to understand why policing access to such spaces was of such paramount importance to my informants, particularly in the cases of Mohamed and Malek’s parties, one would have to look at the ways in which men related to their imagined, heterosexual spheres of contacts and

associations beyond the scene. Such spheres of association, as was usually the general case in the Cairene context, were heavily influenced by the Egyptian class system. While acknowledging their sexualities and the social imaginaries and realities those opened up, my informants nevertheless realized and acknowledged that they were first and foremost deeply embedded within existing classed structures. Once we take this basic fact into account we can begin to see how questions about the gay community and the gay scene become questions about particular ‘forms’ of gay community and ‘types’ of gay scene. We are then able to see how the gay scene can never be understood in isolation from wider power structures that inhibit and constrain Egyptian social relations more widely. While the gay world experienced in cruising areas, hangouts and on the virtual, disembodied cyberspace is one where such structural influences are muddled and confounded the controllable reality of the private sphere becomes one where such structures strive.

The scene’s insular practices can in some ways be explained by men’s confident assertions regarding the wide disparity in life experience engendered by the Egyptian class system and the inability of a shared sexuality to bridge such chasms. As Malek once told me, after venturing to some of the downtown scene cafes with me, ‘we have so much more to lose, they have nothing to lose’. Malek was speaking with regards to the downtown scene’s unhampered flamboyance and meant to imply that, in terms of social and symbolic capital in particular, the downtown scene’s limited access to such resources meant they were placing less at risk through their flamboyant practices.

While this perceived disparity in life experience and access to various forms of capital can go some ways to explaining the scene’s insular practices it seems that such practices were similarly influenced by men’s fears of alienation from existing classed spheres where they could very well be ‘accepted’ as gay men. As Malek’s discussion of the types of gay men he wanted at his party seems to imply, there was a concern with the fashioning of a scene that could easily slip and slide into existing class folds. Ensuring the exclusion of men from dissimilar class backgrounds was paramount to this process but, as Malek’s comments regarding flamboyance seem to suggest, a similar exclusion of

particular forms or types of gayness and a cultivation of other ideals of gayness seem to feed into such a process as well.

The situation is further complicated by men such as Selim who had mixed feelings regarding the integration of a gay scene into existing classed spheres. For men such as Selim, the existence of a gay social scene that was somewhat separate and apart from his social relations beyond its confines was particularly important for maintaining his standing within those very same spheres other men were so keen on being integrated into as a scene. So while Selim may have very well supported insular class practices among gay men he would have supported them for slightly different reasons and ones perhaps more aligned with Haitham's reasons for asking certain men to leave his party.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to situate my research and the gay community and its various scenes within Egypt's wider class system and to interrogate the ways in which class, status and stratification influenced the social organization of the community. Furthermore, I have attempted to present and explain how men conceived of class both in structural terms and in their day-to-day interactions and experiences with and within this existing system of social stratification. While men opposed the general, widely disparate and unequal Egyptian class system the ways in which class, status and social stratification were inhabited on a daily basis was far more complicated. I have presented the ways in which this experience of class in and through action has many implications for the scene, dividing and splicing it in various ways. I have used Bourdieu's approach to the various forms of capital involved in status negotiation in order to present how my informants conceived of class his notion of habitus in order to better illustrate the ways in which class standing was inferred through and inscribed into social interactions.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Topography of ‘Gay Cairo’

I often heard my informants exclaim that some popular gay hangout or cruising area was not ‘gay enough’ on a particular night or that it had been ‘taken over by straight people’. Such instances underscored the on-going processes of geographical or spatial appropriation and reclamation that the gay scene was implicated in. Cairo’s various interlinking gay scenes are sprawling webs of social connections but such social relations find expression in men’s interactions with one another and in their congregations. These scenes exist within what my informants conceived of as an alternative landscape of the city; a landscape that was almost only acknowledged by gay men and, as such, became their own. While the importance of having safe spaces where gay men could meet is self-explanatory on a basic, practical level I argue that this alternative landscape and the general perception that it was always somehow at risk of being lost reflected the general precariousness of the gay scene. These places radically shaped the scene and were in turn continually constituted as scene-specific places through their incorporation into men’s activities. While they may have been unstable, precarious and even at times unsafe they still acted as important landmarks and anchors for the contours of the gay landscape.

I am struck by the relevance of one of John’s comments recounted in the chapter three to this discussion of place; as he was talking about giving directions on the street he pointed out that, in Egypt, people almost always gave directions using landmarks as opposed to street names and so the choice of landmarks one would use to give directions would depend upon the person who had asked for or needed directions in the first place<sup>57</sup>. Another example drawn from a night’s outing with a group of four men who considered themselves to be from upper and upper-middle class backgrounds can shed similar light on the ways in which

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<sup>57</sup> I am not arguing that this way of giving directions is specific to Egypt since this presumably happens everywhere but the way John was highlighting Egypt’s fragmented class structure and how the choice of landmarks is therefore significantly different from his home country, the US.

'landmarks' were used to chart the city's topography based upon in-group understandings (class based groups in this case as well). We had met on a rooftop bar overlooking the Nile in the heart of Zamalek and as we were discussing where to have dinner one of the men, Hussein, suggested that we go grab a bite from a place he knew in Imbaba, a lower-middle class neighborhood of the city. Omar put on an exaggeratedly incredulous tone as he asked Hussein if he was joking. Hussein then retorted with 'you idiot, Imbaba is the extension of the Cairo Jazz Club'. Hussein's comment was meant as a joke as he referred to Cairo Jazz Club, a bar and live performances venue popular among Cairene upper-middle and upper class elites on the opposite bank of the Nile from Imbaba. Hussein not only meant to juxtapose these two widely different 'places' but to bring Imbaba into Omar's sphere of class-specific spatial understandings and mappings of the city through the use of a familiar landmark. As was the case with John's comments, while Hussein was speaking with class background in mind it seems that his statements had some bearing on the topic of Cairo's gay landscape since gay areas became part of group-specific knowledge in a way similar to class-specific knowledge of places. Places became a part of the particular spatial/landscape knowledge of a distinct group of people and the value, or even intelligibility, of such landmarks became to some extent contained within and limited to this particular group. Using the *Jardino* as a point of reference, for example, would be absolutely meaningless for the majority of Cairenes since they would have no knowledge of the city's gay landscape. As Boellstorff writes of his research in Indonesia, "The places of *gay* and *lesbi* worlds are sites of belonging and recognition, places to find people who are the 'same' (*sama*) as oneself because they too 'desire the same'" (Boellstorff 2005: 126). The situation was the same for my informants, they constructed a gay landscape and geography where they could find and recognize sameness in their 'deviance' from the heteronormative. Using the term the *Jardino* with other gay men on Cairo's gay scenes gives it a specific type of meaning and in some cases may even signal one's homosexuality. The fact that *Jardino* traverses class/scene boundaries to certain extent (as it was used by my informants from both scenes and from all sorts of class backgrounds) cements its position as a 'gay place' first and foremost.

This chapter draws significantly on recent anthropological scholarship on place-making and the ways in which social actors are involved in a process of spatial orientation and clarification through their movement in, through and with space. More specifically and using Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga's terms, the notions of embodied and inscribed space (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). As Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga explain, the notion of embodied space addresses the ways in which space must always be explicated and understood in terms of its relation to the body's sensorial capacities and the ways in which spaces and places are not only experienced but are created and transformed through perception and movement. This phenomenological approach to understanding place relies on the assumption that, as social actors, our understandings of place begins with our sense of being-in as well as through our movement through it. As Casey explains, "There is no knowing or sensing a place except by being in that place, and to be in a place is to be in a position to perceive it. Knowledge of place is not, then, subsequent to perception...but is ingredient in perception itself" and, as such, experiences of place are almost always ones of embodiment (Casey 1996, 18). As for the notion of inscribed space, it "...implies that humans 'write' in an enduring way in their presence on their surroundings" (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 13). While I do not agree with Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga's explication of space as a neutral terrestrial domain, devoid of meaning that is then inscribed upon through the actions and presence of individuals I am still interested in the notion that through presence and action social actors can lay claim and transform place. I will return to these concepts in the analysis of my ethnographic material later on in the chapter and will hopefully highlight their relevance and usefulness to my material.

In order to examine Cairene gay topography and what it can tell us about understandings of place-making among gay men I will first look at one of the main cruising areas, the *Jardino*, as an example of the way constructions of scene-specific narratives and men's interactions within particular places 'made them gay'. In the second section of the chapter I will focus more closely on more explicit notions of place-making and on instances when men consciously spoke of 'making gay places' in the form of hangouts and bars and how claims to those places was still accompanied by a sense of precariousness and uncertainty. In the

final section I would like to examine the ways in which time and temporality were implicated into place making since, as will become clear, places are particularly gay at specific times and on specific days of the week and are hence, in a way, temporally constructed.

### **Cruising in the *Jardino* and on Kasr El-Nil Bridge**

For most of the city's residents and visitors these two spots blended seamlessly into the complicated fabric of the cityscape. Kasr El-Nil Bridge was at once a bottle-neck entry point into downtown Cairo and the site of languid strolls on sprightly spring evenings and stifling summer nights while the *Jardino*<sup>58</sup> blended itself rather effortlessly into the ordinariness of its surrounding area's residential milieu. For gay men however, those spots were central sites of scene activity and were integral to the alternative landscape that they felt they had to continually construct and recreate through their repeated activities in them. In this section I will focus on the *Jardino* in order to explore the processes through which these gay places were continually 'placed' as such through gay men's movement through them and the importance of those areas for the construction of the scene's meta-narratives.

#### **'El Jar'**

The *Jardino* or *El Jar*, as it is usually referred to in its diminutive form, was used to refer to a number of intersecting roads in the relatively affluent neighborhood of Heliopolis. The tramline runs through the main centerpiece of this entanglement of streets, the wide, two-way boulevard running along one side of The Merryland, a recreational park housing restaurants, cafes and amusement park rides. It seemed to have existed, albeit in different guises, as a cruising spot for as long as any of the men I have spoken to could remember. Its fluidity stems from its almost boundary-less character; several landmarks were used as less-than-concrete points of entry/exist but in reality the area seemed to flow seamlessly into its surroundings and whatever fluid boundaries were temporarily

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<sup>58</sup> The 'Jardino' is the term used by gay men and to my knowledge is not known or used by people unaware of the scene or its lexicon.

erected were contingent upon the point at which cruising stopped. Even among men who did not cruise regularly the *Jardino* was recognized as a gay landmark or part of the city's gay landscape.

At one end of the *Jardino* sat Heliopolis' bustling Roxy Square, usually struggling to contain gridlocked traffic that seemed to only be compounded by several traffic lights, while at the other end stood a large mosque. During the day the *Jardino* aroused little suspicion and usually little more than angry bouts of frustration by car, bus and microbus drivers and passengers. It was not until midnight at the earliest that gay men started venturing into the area to cruise. The network of narrower, quieter roads parallel and perpendicular to the main boulevard provided areas where men could go once they had spotted someone they liked so they could have a chat or, in some cases, have sex in their cars. Because of the heavy traffic through the area at most times of the day, peak cruising hours were usually between one and three in the morning. Moreover, the number of men cruising on any given night was somewhat haphazard and inconsistent and so there have been many times where I have gone cruising and could only find one or two other cars cruising in the span of two hours. The weekends were predictably the busiest but as Cairo traffic slowed down even later on weekends the cruising hours tended to be pushed even later. Cruising in the *Jardino* usually involved fleeting encounters, either social or sexual, and rarely did men exchange contact details or develop lasting friendships or relationships. I hope the fleeting nature of those encounters will become apparent through the following description of cruising.

The *Jardino* was, for the most part, a car cruising area and so already limited the number of men who could go cruising there since they must either own or have access to a car. Malek had spoken to me several times about the area before we happened to drive through it late one night on our way home. It was already around four in the morning by the time we left a friend's house in the neighborhood, late even by *Jardino* standards, but Malek encouraged me to drive around a couple of times in order to find out what it was like. Since Malek had not gone cruising before he suggested I contact a mutual acquaintance who seemed to have a reputation for cruising quite often. During our first unplanned

excursion into the *Jar* we happened across one car that seemed to be driving a little too slow for the deserted road and, as we drove up next to it, the driver looked over and the car issued a slight honk, a sign that he was interested I was told. Since this was a 'test cruise' Malek told me to speed up and drive off onto one of the other roads since we would not want him to misconstrue our slowing down as interest on our part.

Over the following months it proved somewhat difficult to coordinate with Malek's friend since we were only distant acquaintances at the time but, following John's deportation in March, Malek began getting bored by the monotony of the gay scene as he had come to know it and so, in an attempt to rediscover the various gay scenes in the city, we began cruising in the *Jardino*. After a somewhat failed, spur-of-the-moment attempt at meeting people in the *Jar* Malek proclaimed, with a fair amount of resolve and enthusiasm, that we would have to dedicate a night to cruising since it was evidently not as simple as we had thought it would be. Not sure how to act even if we could gauge someone's interest our attempts seemed destined to fail. Despite Malek's rather creative efforts at attracting attention and creating some rapport, such as sticking his tongue out at passing cars (a predictably flawed method) we were unable to meet anyone.

We made our way for the first proper cruise at around two in the morning on a Wednesday night and, in his regular take-charge manner, Malek repeated that we had to be serious about it and could not give up and go home until three in the morning at the earliest. After around fifteen minutes of driving from one end of the *Jar* all the way to the mosque at the other end only to make a U-turn and repeat the drive all over again we spotted a man who seemed to be cruising. As I sped up enough to align our car with his, Malek, sitting in the passenger seat, looked over at the other driver and with an exaggerated shrug that seemed to signal that we did not know what to do next tried to mouth some words. Still moving slowly down the street, the driver of the other vehicle rolled down the window and told us to go down the narrower street off one side of the boulevard so we could stop and talk. After parking down a quiet road occupied by the parked cars of sleeping residents we got out and met the thirty-something year

old man by the hood of our car and the trunk of his. Malek had already told me that it would be best to give him fake names but no names were exchanged, he simply joked and, as a friendly jibe, said it was plainly obvious we had not done this before since we did not know how to act on the road. He then smiled and explained that we had the right idea and that men usually did things the way we did, albeit with a lot more subtlety. Responding to Malek's observation that it seemed like a quiet night for cruising, the man said that the *Jardino* used to be bursting with activity and, as he gestured further down the street we were on, added that the street was usually lined with cars and large groups of men hanging out but that, lamentably, the cruising scene had quieted down considerably. He then added that he did not go cruising often and that he only did it to pass the time since he lived right around the corner. After only a few minutes of small talk we decided to get into our respective cars and drive on without any names or contact details exchanged.

A little later, armed with sandwiches from the McDonald's on the main boulevard and emboldened by our recent success, we drove back onto the main street but, having learned from our earlier mistake, attempted to be more subtle. It was only a matter of minutes before we spotted another car that seemed to be cruising as well, this time the driver looked pretty young, probably in his early twenties. In a manoeuvre that we later realized was the general way to go about things we sped up enough to catch up with the car, slowed down long enough to look over at the driver, then sped up again and gave a right turn-signal in order to go off onto one of the side streets, this time at the Roxy Square end of the park. As we had expected, the car followed our lead, turned into the street behind us and parked further down the road. We met somewhere between the two parked cars and this time exchanged our agreed-upon fake names for what we presumed to be a name similar to ours in terms of its veracity. He spoke in a loud, animated fashion and boasted that he was very experienced as far as cruising was concerned and that he had discovered it when he was sixteen and by now knew the ins and outs of the cruising scene. He then said, as a note of caution and a topic of gossip, that older men were usually eccentric and did strange things. He began to recount how he had stopped to chat with an older man in a Mercedes S-Class one night out of desperation. He, again in a cautionary tone, said that he

had not gotten into the other man's car but when he got into his own car the man immediately took his penis out, at which point he yelled at him to get out of the car. His story was both a warning and a fun way to impart knowledge on two newcomers to the cruising scene. During our short conversation he told us that the police rarely ever harassed men in the area and consequently cruising was a safer way of meeting men than meeting them at house parties. By safer he meant there was less of a risk of arrest or police interference unless one was to do something completely outrageous. He laughed loudly as he explained how he could come up with a multitude of explanations for why he was driving on the street but if he was caught in *sha'a mafrousha* ('furnished apartment'; when used as an expression it connotes some kind of 'den of iniquity' or a place for prostitution) his mother wouldn't even come down to the police station to bail him out. Following our brief exchanges we all got back on the main boulevard, continued to cruise and only saw him again talking to another man by the side of the road.

By the time we stopped to speak with the third and final man for the night we had already considerably improved our cruising skills. Over the following months the driving patterns for cruising became something of a second nature. As I drove Malek home that first night he could hardly contain his excitement and said that he now understood how men could become addicted to cruising since it was essentially a hunt and a play with movement. The way one signaled interest was through driving patterns; in most cases it took a couple of laps around the cruising range before cars actually turned onto one of the side streets. The 'chase' was part of the fun, allure and intrigue of cruising; driving at a relatively low speed of around thirty or forty kilometers per hour one had to spot which other cars were cruising by monitoring those that continued to circle around the area, once men determined that a certain car was cruising and that they were in fact interested in its occupant(s) the real fun began as one car followed the other for a few hundred meters, perhaps even flashing its headlights before speeding off to see if the other driver would follow suit. This play with speeds could go on for a couple of laps before one of the drivers made a turn signal and drove onto one of the peripheral streets.



This movement through place draws our attention to the notion of embodied space explicated earlier; as men wove their way through the Jardino they were not only experiencing their surroundings but actively engaging in a relational process of place-making. As they moved through the landscape, clad in their metallic outer-skins, and as they adjusted their driving patterns they not only affirmed the *Jar*'s cruising potential but imbued their actions and driving with meaning, meaning borne through their emplacement in the *Jar*. What I hope to highlight here is the mutual constitution of embodied action and place; again, as Casey explicates "...perception remains as constitutive as it is constituted. This is especially evident when we perceive places; our immersion in them is not subjection to them. Since we may modify their influence even as we submit to it. This influence is as meaningful as it is sensuous...The dialectic of perception and place (and of both with meaning) is as intricate as it is profound, and it is never-ending" (Casey 1996, 19).

All of my cruising excursions involved fleeting, limited interactions such as the ones described above and usually involved men talking as little about themselves as possible. Such conversations sometimes resembled personal ads where men would try to fit in just enough factual information about themselves with an additional sentence or two about their flaws or virtues to add an extra personal touch. Those encounters, as stated earlier, did not usually result in enduring friendships or relationships but it was the mass of such encounters and their continuing occurrence that gave the Jardino its meaning as a 'gay place'. Perhaps the fleeting nature of such encounters can be integrated into our conceptualization of the *Jardino* as a sensual space; men's experiences of and with the *Jar* became perceptually bound to this sense of ephemerality and so even as they continually re-inscribed their presence onto the *Jar* they, in some ways, inscribed this sense of transience into its spatial configuration.

### **Cruising as Activity, Acquired Skill and Place-Marker**

The act of cruising was a definitive characteristic of the *Jar* and, consequently, one could argue that the boundaries of the *Jar* itself were bound up in the activity and were extended depending on the point at which cruising stopped. Men

sometimes spotted one another on the main boulevard or on one of the smaller offshoots only to stop to talk a mile or two away. In such cases the main area of the *Jar* acted as a spatial reference point that signaled a certain kind of desire but the boundaries of the area where cruising took place (its definitive characteristic) were expanded.

After cruising one evening with Malek I dropped him off at home and drove through the *Jardino* again on my way home at around four in the morning. As I was stopped at a traffic light in Roxy Square a silver car that I had seen cruising earlier rolled up next to mine. The driver looked over and smiled at me as a sign of recognition and no sooner had he done that than the light turned green and I continued on my way back home. About five minutes later and almost a kilometer away I noticed that a car had been following me and flashing its headlights incessantly, as I slowed down to give that car a chance to overtake mine I realized that it was the same one and the driver rolled down his window as he passed my car. We came to a stop by the side of the road but did not get out of our cars and spoke through our rolled down windows; he was a young Egyptian man who had been living in the Emirates and said that he was heading in the same direction I was heading in. Not knowing what else to say and realizing that he had received a call I waved off and continued on my way home. Another ten minutes later and just as I was approaching the 6<sup>th</sup> of October Bridge, one of the city's main traffic arteries, I saw him drive past my car and gesture for me to stop by the side of the road again. We came to a stop on a wide road that would usually be bustling with traffic but had at that point been deserted save for a few cars that zoomed past at speeds only possible in Cairo in the pre-dawn hours. As we stood outside our cars he explained to me that he had just moved to Cairo having been brought up in the Gulf. He was very forward and without wasting any time asked me "*Betheb eih? Eih el role beta'ak?*" ('What do you like? What's your role?'); realizing that he was asking about sexual role I was very quick to explain that I was not cruising for sex and after turning down an invitation to 'sit' in his car we both said our goodbyes and continued on our way home.

This encounter would not have been possible had it not been for the *Jardino* and the meanings associated with it. While we did not actually interact in the main area of the *Jardino* its reach was expanded when we stopped much further out, in an entirely different neighborhood of the city. In a sense, this place and the bundle of meanings associated with it could act as a powerful reference point for the scene, not only as a landmark but also in terms of the multitude of interactions and encounters made possible by it. This potential, however, draws our attention to the way in which the *Jardino* could only be continually invested with cruising significance if men were, not only aware of its existence, but also informed of and trained in its methods of socializing. The initial encounters recounted earlier in this chapter exemplify the importance of imparting knowledge of the ‘cruising scene’ and its dynamics on new entrants and ensuring that they understood how the correct movement through the space and the proper articulation and understanding of driving cues not only allowed men to participate in the scene but contributed to its actual existence and constitution. I realize that this might make this seem like a structured process of learning or education but it reflects a general trend in the gay scene to explain to ‘newbies’ how the scene operates and educate them in terms of its peculiarities.

The *Jardino* and its subjects became entangled in a web of action and signification whereby their cruising was imbued with meaning through its placement in the *Jardino* whilst the *Jardino* could only be continually reproduced as a particular type of place through men’s cruising activity. I do not want to argue for the cyclical nature of this relationship since it would be impossible to ascertain or convincingly argue that any determining factor initiates this process. I would however add that cruising in the *Jardino* presents us with a great opportunity to examine the ways in which place-making is a process that is at once experienced and constructed by and through acting subjects and yet such actions are in a sense also defined by the places within which they take place. This points to another element of these interconnected processes, their relative instability and ambiguity. The problem presented by the *Jardino* as a fluid place is the fact that such fluidity inevitably entailed a certain level of uncertainty and variability; while both the general spatial and temporal contours of the *Jardino* provided men with certain opportunities for the

perpetuation of these processes the fact that they were flexible and the fact that there was no way of fully predicting or influencing the level of cruising happening on any given night meant that these processes were continually put at risk. The transformation of the *Jardino* from a general socializing area to a more particular type of cruising spot<sup>59</sup>, referenced by one of the men we spoke to, was itself a manifestation of this instability since the form of activity men engaged in along with the development of other avenues for the expression of a gay sociality altered the significance and meaning of the *Jardino* as a gay place while still situating it within the contours of the city's gay landscape.

The *Jardino* did not transform fully into a gay place from one to three in the morning on particular nights before returning to the its regular heteronormative state but its gay potential coexisted within the city's 'multivocal' (Rodman 2003) landscape. In her critique of anthropological approaches to place that seem to reduce it to setting Rodman urges us to seriously consider place analytically and to recognize the ways in which place is socially and discursively constructed through a polyphony of voices and that each place is in turn also multiple in its relation to other locales. As she states, "It is time to recognize that places, like voices, are local and multiple. For each inhabitant, a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places. The links in these chains of experiences places are forged of culture and history" (Rodman 2003, 208). This resonates with Parker's work on homosexuality in Brazil and the ways in which gay men transform the spaces into gay specific zones of desire. As Parker, in his examination of the geography of the gay world in Brazil, describes how public 'heterosexual places' can be integrated into a 'gay world' through the performativity of homosexual men; "... public venues become a stage for relatively impersonal homoerotic contacts...and through these homoerotic adventures, ongoing acts of *pasquerando* and *fazendo pegação* (roughly translatable as cruising), *olhares* (stares or prolonged glances), and *seduções* (seductions)..." the heterosexuality of such spaces is called into question and an opportunity is created for a differential experience of that space (Parker 1998). Prolonged glances and

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<sup>59</sup> Discussed further in the following section.

seductions are in this formulation acts of disclosure of ones non-heterosexual desire in public spaces. Such disclosures and the opportunities they open up contribute to the multivocality of public spaces, they imbue them with another layer of meaning<sup>60</sup>. So if we are to use this concept of multivocality we can see how gay men in Cairo were essentially attempting to join in the city's spatial cacophony. As the young man Malek and I spoke to highlighted, it might have actually been that this multivocality or cacophony provided him with a sense of security in the city since he could appeal to the different interpretations of the place to distance himself from his homosexuality. So while multivocality implies ambiguity this ambiguity can, in some instances, be viewed positively even though it is, for the most part viewed rather negatively.

### **The *Jardino* and Scene Narratives**

Perhaps one of the most striking features of the *Jardino* is how prominently it figured in many scene related narratives. Even among men who did not go cruising very often the *Jardino* was spoken of almost regularly and was recognized as a gay 'place' of sorts<sup>61</sup>. For example, Malek's insistence on exploring the *Jardino* as a 'gay place' or 'scene' despite having never ventured into the area to cruise before highlights its ever-present existence in men's notions of the city's gay contours. The man Malek and I spoke to briefly on our first outing in the *Jardino* was neither the first nor the last to tell me that the *Jardino* had seen its heyday as a gay socializing spot in the 1990s (as was discussed in some detail in chapter two) and was now relegated mostly to the narratives of older gay men and to the smaller number of gay men who still go cruising there since the advent of the Internet and other hangouts in the downtown area. Despite its relative retreat from the scene's regular activity however, men often spoke about this heyday as part of a meta-narrative about the scene's development and the development of gay life in the city. Even as it receded from the actual daily lives of gay men as a place to socialize the *Jardino*,

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<sup>60</sup> For work similar to Parker's on cruising and homosexuality also see Clatts 1999, Galli and Rafael 1999 and Tattelman 1999.

<sup>61</sup> For example, men often use the word the *Jardino* to refer to the general area or to give directions even though it would be equally as effective to use the Merryland as a landmark.

with its fleeting social and sexual encounters, still exerted some kind of power over men through its integration into the history of the scene.

There was a marked difference between the ways in which younger scene-men recounted stories about the *Jardino* and the ways in which ‘older men’ that were around to experience this glorious past recounted stories. What was perhaps most interesting however was that younger men were not only as keen as I was to find out about this lost history but seized every opportunity to tell me that I should talk to older men to find out more about the history of the scene and, in a sense, document it. Narratives were important because they implied that the scene had some kind of continuity, particularly since the 2001 crackdown represented such a break with the scene that had been developing in the 1990s (this notion of historicity and narrativity will be explored in greater detail in chapter five).

In general there was a particular interest in the way in which the scene has been affected by the growing uptake of the Internet but also the ways in which the 2001 crackdown had altered the way the scene operated. The *Jardino*’s 1990s heyday was an integral part of this narrative because it had been one of the key sites for men to meet and, additionally, of all the scene hangouts from the 1990s, it was the only one that still served as an active part of the gay landscape, although in an altered form<sup>62</sup>. But perhaps most importantly, when men recounted stories about the 1990s’ *Jardino* they recounted stories about a time when the 2001 crackdown had not dampened the scene’s aspirational attitude. An Egyptian business executive in his late-thirties, Adham, told me that it had seemed like there could even be an openly gay community in Cairo because the *Jardino* would be magically transformed into a raging street party on the weekends when large groups of gay men met there. A narrative that is particularly relevant is how the area acquired its title; Adham told me that the scene had been smaller back then and one of the popular men at the time, a 17-year-old, would often lie to his parents whenever he went out to meet with all the other gay men in the area and so would tell his parents that he was going to the

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<sup>62</sup> Certain bars that had been popular in the 1990s have either closed down or are now simply forgotten by the scene.

*Jardino* which happened to be a coffee shop at one of the hotels in the area at the time. Somehow the name gained notoriety among other men and it was useful to be able to talk about the area without actually referring to it in a language that others would easily understand thereby perpetuating the exclusivity of the gay landscape.

The *Jardino* integrated itself so centrally into the imaginary of the gay landscape and so even when men only spoke of it they were, in a sense, laying further claim to it. As described in chapter one, sometime during the summer Gigi was lured out onto a deserted road near the agricultural land on the outskirts of the city by an online date. As he came to a stop to speak with the man he had made plans with he was suddenly ambushed whilst still in his car. One of the two men who attacked him lunged into the car through the driver's window, practically throwing half his torso into the car and obscuring Gigi's vision while attempting to pry his hands off the steering wheel. In an attempt to escape Gigi pressed his foot onto the gas pedal, spotted a large lamppost to one side of the road and, without much foresight, floored the gas pedal as he veered closer to the post and rammed his attacker's body into it. The force of the impact hurled the attacker's body outside the car and swung him into the back door on the driver's side completely mangling the door and shattering the glass. Having narrowly escaped the attack and shaken, not only by the attack itself, but also the idea of injuring someone so terribly Gigi met up with Ali and I near the *Jardino* where we were having dinner. In an attempt to lift Gigi's spirits Ali told him that he had had no other choice and that he had in fact put those men off bashing and robbing more gay men and jokingly told him that he would now have to dub him the "patron saint of battered queens". This became somewhat of a running joke and when Gigi once turned up near the *Jardino* with the battered door unhinged and in the backseat of his car after having had it replaced we joked that we would have to erect a statue in his honor and mount the door onto it as a sort of shield. Ali then said the statue would be put up in the middle of the *Jardino* as yet another landmark for gay men. It is no coincidence that in joking about erecting a statue in Gigi's honor and his service to would-be gay victims that Ali chose the *Jardino* as the site of this imaginary memorial. Ali and Gigi both recognized the

*Jardino* as a gay place and, as such, a memorial to honor a figure that has stood up for the scene would have fit in perfectly in that spot.

The continuity and perseverance of the *Jardino* as a general fixture of the gay landscape despite the 2001 crackdown increased its importance for the gay scene but the changes that it has undergone and its existence now as a shadow of its former self still point to a certain level of ambiguity. Despite this ambiguity however its transformation and the events with which it was associated allowed the *Jardino* to become a place that was constituted and continually reconstituted through narratives as well as actions. As Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga point out in their introduction to an edited collection of anthropological papers on place, there has in fact been much anthropological work that deals with the narrativity of place particularly since, as anthropologists, much of the material we gather about our informants' experience of place comes in the form of narratives and stories (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Furthermore, following Berdoulay (Berdoulay 1989), Rodman asserts that far from simply figuring in the narratives of informants, places should themselves be seen as "narratives in their own right" (Rodman 2003, 206). Place thus becomes constructed in one way through narrative. As Berdoulay writes, "a place comes explicitly into being in the discourse of its inhabitants, and particularly in the rhetoric it promotes" (cited in Rodman 2003, 206). Once such conceptions of place are taken into account we can see the absolute importance of narratives to the ways in which gay men relate to the *Jardino* as a gay place. So even as the lost heyday of the *Jardino* is lamented in narratives about the scene's development the *Jardino* is still being discursively constructed and reconfigured through such narratives.

### **Hangouts and Other Socializing Places**

The somewhat organic spatial transformation of cruising areas can be contrasted with the concerted, conscious and self-conscious attempts at place making by gay men evident in the creation of hangouts, gay-friendly bars and socializing areas. While most men would argue that the *Jardino's* heyday as a socializing spot has come and gone they would also attribute the *Jardino's* social decline to the emergence of new establishments and areas where they could meet and



socialize, such as *El Borsa* area downtown and the *Korba* area only a few minutes' drive from the *Jardino* (a spot that was particularly popular during the month of Ramadan). Unlike the *Jardino*, which retained a somewhat special place within a historical narrative of the scene and seems to have existed for as long as most men could remember, such spots seemed to be ever-changing, precarious and requiring the constant attention of and efforts for re-appropriation by gay men. In order to sketch out these places and the processes of appropriation they were implicated in I will discuss the case of a bar popular among upper-middle and upper class gay Cairenes called Ruba, a second downtown establishment that attracts a somewhat wider clientele and finally *El Borsa* area.

### **Ruba Bar<sup>63</sup>**

When I first arrived in Cairo in November of 2009 Ruba Bar had already established itself as a fixture of the gay scene's weekend outings but had become embroiled in an uncomfortable intra-scene conflict as it made a brief but troubling appearance on a popular gay blog. The blogger had made a reference to the bar in one of his posts and men, having grown accustomed to the idea of police surveillance of Internet activity, had grown wary of a police raid similar to the one on the Queen Boat. As week after uneventful week passed without any raids materializing men deemed it safe to venture back to the bar and it soon became popular again, particularly on Thursday nights. The unassuming, intimate, lower-ground floor bar lay on a quiet but famous downtown street. With a maximum capacity of around fifty or sixty people it usually seemed like men had to squeeze into whatever spot they could find on particularly busy nights and some were even left standing, ducking out of the way as waiters squeezed through with trays of drinks and food. Unlike several other bars in the area Ruba offered men a selection of imported liquors in addition to the beer on offer at most other bars, its prices were somewhat higher and, as such, was considered more of an upper-scale establishment.

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<sup>63</sup> I have changed the name of the bar in order to preserve the security and anonymity of my informants.

This bar was offered up to me as a perfect and proud example of how gay men found places for themselves within the oppressive structure of the city. On a Thursday night during the first two months of my fieldwork Ess and Michael, a college senior at a private university at the time, sat on either side of me at Ruba and explained to me how it had been made into a gay bar. They were both dismayed by the number of men sitting at various tables who did not appear to be gay and Ess proudly declared that he had ‘made’ this bar gay. Michael almost immediately disagreed and said that he should be the one taking credit for the creation of this bar since the first ‘gay night’ was the night of a farewell party in his honor before he left for a two-month stay in Germany the previous summer. Following a brief period of banter they both decided to take ‘joint-credit’ for the bar and Ess then suggested another bar that they could ‘turn gay’. I decided to ask how one could go about doing that and Ess explained to that it was a simple matter and that all one had to do was to call ‘all of the gay men’ and let them know that they would be meeting at a specific date and time at a particular place<sup>64</sup>. Laying further claim to the bar Ess loudly proclaimed that he wanted the music changed from the pop music playing in the background to some jazz and called the waiter over to change the CD. Once the waiter had left Ess turned back to me and said that he had made five mixed CDs and had left them at the bar so they would have a specific selection of music.

Another group of gay men came in about an hour later and six more gay men joined our own group over the course of the evening<sup>65</sup>. Despite what I thought was an acceptable turnout, Ess, Michael and the other men were disappointed and even complained several times that the bar was not ‘gay enough’ particularly since half of the bar had by that point been ‘taken over’ by a straight birthday party. Ess, known for his boisterous flamboyant behaviour, felt like he had to compensate for the shortage in ‘gayness’ and was told to tone down his ‘attitude’ several times by his friends. After almost every single admonishment Ess would loudly exclaim that Ruba was a gay bar and that he

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<sup>64</sup> Upon hearing this I immediately thought of an article I had read in 2008 about the take-over of hip and popular straight bars by gay men in Boston, a movement called the ‘Guerilla Queer Bar’. [http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/articles/2008/04/03/take\\_over\\_this\\_bar\\_ofen/](http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/articles/2008/04/03/take_over_this_bar_ofen/)

<sup>65</sup> They knew several of the men I was sitting with and they were the ones who told me they were gay.

should be able to act however he wanted. Eventually Hossam, an Egyptian man in his thirties based in Beirut, told him that he had to tone down his behavior since this was the only place that ‘tolerated’ them and that they should not risk losing it<sup>66</sup>. At around one in the morning the men agreed that they had had enough of the straight clientele at the bar and decided to leave and return on a ‘gayer’ night. The popularity of Ruba among my upper-middle and upper class informants was due to its ‘gay element’; as far as my informants were concerned, there was nothing particularly special about the bar itself to draw them back time and time again besides the fact that it was frequented by other gay men and so the dilution of the bar’s gay character essentially transformed it into a ‘bar like any other’.

Ruba remained popular throughout my fieldwork and, following its closure during the period of protests in January, was once again a hotspot for gay men only weeks after the ousting of President Mubarak. The waiters at the bar were almost certainly aware of the men’s sexualities but remained silent and seemed to only occasionally signal their disapproval with minute gestures such as stern, disapproving glances directed at overtly flamboyant men<sup>67</sup>. Usually the only explanation men gave for the staff’s tacit acceptance of their appropriation of the place was their monetary contribution; it was usually presented as a mutually beneficial arrangement, the establishment had a more or less steady source of income and men could count on the bar to accept them. There was still, however, an understanding that men’s visibility had to be properly managed so as not to offend staff beyond repair or to affect their non-homosexual clientele.

The inconsistent ‘gayness’ of Ruba Bar was a recurring topic of conversation and the target of men’s ire and frustration. Even though men acknowledged that they had been successful at creating this place for the scene they were always unsure as to the level of gay turnout on any given Thursday. It seemed like men would have to relinquish ‘control’ of the bar if there was not a large enough turnout on a particular night and would then have wait for another

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<sup>66</sup> He explained at that point that he had been kicked out of several places before for overtly gay behaviour.

night to reclaim it. In a sense, it was possible for a particular establishment to be labeled a ‘gay hangout’ but it could only be continually reproduced as such by maintaining the high level of gay attendance. This created a cyclical system whereby gay men would only go there if it was sufficiently gay but certain establishments could only be made sufficiently gay by the consistent presence of gay men on particular nights. Men usually recognized the paradox this system created as well as the factors that lay beyond their control. As a result, they recognized that they must capitalize on their strength as a social network to ensure it remained a regular spot for socializing but also understood that they could not lay absolute claim to the place. Consequently, it was viewed as a power struggle and one could that they could on particular occasions lose or have to forfeit. For example, one Thursday night in March Michael sent out a text message to a group of us who had planned to meet at Ruba saying;

“Every1 our winter shelter has been infected by the straighties! Move 2 ‘O’ xx”<sup>68</sup>

This was in no way an anomaly and happened multiple times; those instances highlighted for men the impossibility of laying absolute claim to any of the places that they attempted to ‘make gay’ but it also did not deter them from continually attempting to re-appropriate such places.

### **The O Bar**

The O Bar sat atop a dilapidated downtown hotel, sprawled over the roof of the building. The bar boasted views of the usually darkened neighboring rooftops. A one-star rating used to be less-than-proudly displayed on a wooden plank by the elevator on the ground floor but at some point during the period of fieldwork the star disappeared leaving a groove in its place on the wooden plank that remained mounted on the wall underneath a photo of the hotel’s founder. Whether the star’s disappearance was the result of an actual downgrade by the Ministry of Tourism or a sign of neglect was unclear and became the source of humorous speculation. On busy Thursday nights groups of up to fifty or sixty men would be

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<sup>68</sup> The only thing I changed in the message is the name of the other bar we were supposed to move to.

milling over the green tarp flooring or sitting on a mishmash of outdoor metal furniture and wooden seats dragged from the less popular indoor area. Open twenty-four hours a day, this spot attracted a lot of men and usually stayed busy until five in the morning on the weekends. Unlike Ruba it did not offer much in the form of imported liquor and mostly served beer or the locally bottled 'ID Edge' drinks which were ready-to-drink fruity, vodka cocktails in addition to shisha and some food. Despite somewhat inconsistently and haphazardly demanding a seventeen Egyptian pound minimum charge on some nights the bar was much more class-mixed because of its relatively cheaper drinks, however, there was still limited cross-class interaction.

While the bar had been popular prior to my arrival in Cairo it seemed to only grow in popularity among gay men while I was there. It had grown popular to the point that it was almost exclusively full of gay men over the weekend (particularly Thursday nights) and some men even started getting uncomfortable and feared another Queen Boat style raid by the end of my fieldwork. The men that expressed concern did so because they felt that other men had grown too flamboyant in their behavior and dress and had effectively stopped couching their sexuality in any uncertain terms. By the end of fieldwork it was no longer unusual to find some men in natural tones of lip-gloss and to hear them flirt and cruise loudly. The discomfort felt by some men as the O Bar became increasingly more popular and more visibly 'gay' highlights a paradoxical element of gay place-making; while men seemed to crave having an exclusively gay and somewhat stable 'gay places' and, as illustrated in the cases here, actively engaged in efforts to carve out such spaces in the city, the more visible and 'stable' a place became the more precarious their situation became from a security point of view. Such places became easier targets for police raids and homophobic attacks and so the process of gay place-making at times felt destined to teeter between permanence and ephemerality.

Like the Ruba Bar, the staff usually attempted to ignore those loud flirtations, the *benag* (a gay slang term for very loud, somewhat effeminate, high-pitched, sultry laughs, usually jokingly associated with prostitutes) and some intimate touching between men but again, similar to the staff at Ruba, they

voiced their disapproval with some sighs of exasperation, shaking their heads ever so slightly when they would hear particularly crude comments. One Wednesday evening in May, just as the weather had started getting really warm, Gigi joined Malek and I on the rooftop dressed in above-the-knee shorts<sup>69</sup> and a loose white-t-shirt. Malek made fun of Gigi, who was known for his ‘voluptuous’ frame, and pointed out that wearing those shorts only drew more attention to his newly epilated legs. Gigi said he was embarrassed because he had bought a new lotion that had promised to endow his body with a ‘shimmering’ glow but had not realized until he had gotten to the bar that this ‘glow’ was not just a figure-of-speech for healthy skin as he had previously assumed but a literal glow since the lotion had been infused with tiny particles of glitter. Sitting by the light bulbs wrung along a black metal frame those tiny specks really did catch and ever so subtly reflect the light off of his exposed thighs. The waiter and the man responsible for shisha preparation both noticed Gigi’s legs but whether that was due to the ‘shimmer’ or the fact that it was just a lot of exposed skin for a man we could not be sure. They simply looked over with stern serious expressions before looking away again. Later in the evening as the man responsible for shisha preparation was adjusting another patron’s shisha behind Malek’s seat, Malek accidentally said that his partner was ‘dying to sleep with him’<sup>70</sup> in reference to a mutual acquaintance. The man at that point shot Malek a furtive glance denoting that he had heard the comment and turned around and walked back into the indoor area. This episode highlights how the staff usually tried to convey that they were actually aware of the men’s sexualities but also attempted to avoid any real confrontation since those men were all paying customers.

The O Bar was particularly important as a gay place because it was the site of a dramatic confrontation between gay men and heterosexual clients in the last few months of my fieldwork. Unfortunately I was not at the bar for the actual confrontation but I heard several accounts of the events and I will try to recount

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<sup>69</sup> Wearing shorts in the city was not particularly acceptable for men and implied a reduced masculinity.

<sup>70</sup> In Arabic the word ‘dying’ would have been used in the masculine form in reference to Malek’s partner and so would have made it obvious that he was speaking about two men.

the most general and accurate description I have come across<sup>71</sup>. On a very busy weekend night the bar was almost exclusively full of gay men but there was a table occupied by two straight men and a girl in the outdoor area. At some point in the evening the girl said something insulting about the gay men at the next table with unconcealed disgust and derision. The men decided to confront her about her comment and told her to mind her own business, at which point her friend decided to step in to defend her and told the gay men that they should be thankful because they (the straight couple) knew about their sexuality and chose to remain quiet. In a matter of minutes the fight escalated to the point where beer bottles were being broken and brandished as potential weapons and some of the chairs had been thrown around the bar. While some of the gay men stood their ground and fought, another large group made a beeline for the elevators before the police's arrival. In all of the different versions I heard I was told that it was simply that this group of gay men had refused to be placed in a position of weakness and decided to stand up for themselves. Perhaps more importantly than the actual events of that night is the way the story was recounted and told time and time again as a triumph of the gay scene and a refusal to 'give in' to the pressures to conform or be placed in a position where they were simply tolerated and could at any point be expelled from a place that had become their own. As can be expected I received texts from friends to avoid the bar for the next few weeks fearing some sort of reprisal by the authorities or the bar owners or staff, such a reprisal never materialized however. Despite expressing some misgivings about going to the bar only a week after the fight, Ali agreed to come with me to see how the fight had affected the gay turnout and we ended up going there with Gigi and two other friends. Walking down the narrow but buzzing street we could see two or three police vehicles parked near the hotel and as we walked through the metal detector at the entrance to the reception area we found a policeman sitting watching the door. Undeterred, we continued on to the elevator but feared that the bar would be deserted because of the unusual police presence. This fear was quickly dispelled as soon as the rickety elevator doors creaked open and the bar appeared to be teeming with its usual weekend, gay activity. It was packed both indoors and outdoors with gay men who made no attempt at

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<sup>71</sup> Most of the accounts I heard were from men who were there but were not directly part of the fight.

concealing their sexualities; even as a policeman made rounds inside the bar and sat at a table in one far corner men continued issuing *benag*, joking loudly and pirouetting and strutting suggestively. While I want to be careful about attaching my own subjective interpretation to their behavior it really did seem as though they behaved that way in spite of and to spite the officer. It was not an explicit challenge or confrontation but it seemed to signal an unwillingness to ‘play by the rules’ and provided men with an opportunity to lay further claim to the place as their own.

Furthermore, I think this confrontation gave men the opportunity to develop a narrative about the scene and place making similar to those developed about the *Jardino*. News about the events of that night spread like wildfire throughout the various gay scenes of Cairo and the story was told time and time again with a sense of pride. This is pure conjecture but I suspect that if a similar comment had been made at another bar in the city, or perhaps even The O Bar but on a different, ‘un-gay’ night that the outcome and men’s reactions would have been significantly different. I have heard numerous stories about men overhearing remarks about them at restaurants around the city but chose to ignore them in order to avoid similar confrontations. It seems that one of the major factors influencing the way men reacted in this instance was that the comment was made on their ‘home turf’; in the same way Ess attempted to yell out ‘this is a gay bar’ at Ruba the men at the O Bar refused to accept censure of their behavior partly because they had decided in one way or another that this place was their own.

### **‘El Borsa’ Cafes**

Cairo’s downtown streets, usually a relentless cacophony of car horns, shrieking cries, ceaseless whirring of engines and the occasional trills of pop songs drifting out of rolled down car windows or open store fronts had relented quite considerably by the time Mahmoud and his friend, Shehab, had come to pick me up outside one of the bars in the area. Mahmoud, a young Alexandrian I had initially met through the support group meetings held at Malek and John’s apartment had generously offered to take me around the ‘downtown scene’. He



had become well acquainted with the scene through his involvement with a UNAIDS research and support services project promoting safe sex practices among ‘at risk’ communities in the area and had offered to show me around and introduce me to some of his acquaintances over the weekend. As we crossed the main street where Shehab had parked his car and ventured into the darkened, pedestrian area commonly known as *El Borsa* we could hear the distant sounds of the cafes at the end of the wide boulevard. As we got closer we could make out the shapes of the waiters making their way from the brightly lit indoors of the drinks and shisha preparation areas and out onto the stamped concrete where groups of men lounged on multi-colored plastic chairs huddled around small plastic tables. The clusters of tables were bathed in whatever trickles of light managed to find their way from indoor areas, adjacent buildings or sporadic light posts. As we made our way through lively conversation and occasional whiffs of shisha smoke Mahmoud explained to me that we were walking through the section of *El Borsa*<sup>72</sup> favored by the ‘older crowd’ but we quickly made our way through a darkened alleyway and onto a narrower but brighter road parallel to the one we had just been on where the ‘younger crowd’ usually sat. A brick wall painted in a bright, almost lime-like green ran along one side of the street, separating it from what appeared to be a large vacant lot. In a matter of seconds Mahmoud was called over by two men and we were promptly seated at a table opposite the blindingly bright lights of the coffee shops. On this particular street it seemed like the Friday night bustle was just getting underway. This mass of intersecting pedestrian walks and its retinue of street cafes, each seamlessly flowing into the next was the setting for Cairo’s *El Borsa* gay scene.

In contrast with Ruba and The O Bar the coffee shops in this area did not serve alcohol and were the cheapest option in downtown Cairo because men could simply order a cup of tea or a canned soft drink. As opposed to Ruba and The O Bar however, *El Borsa* was a more fluid place, where various establishments catered to gay men but none seemed to be associated in any lasting fashion with the scene. As such, this area seemed more precarious and

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<sup>72</sup> Unlike the *Jardino*, *El Borsa* is not part of a gay-specific slang and means ‘the stock exchange’. The area is called *El Borsa* because this is where the Cairo and Alexandria Stock Exchange (CASE) is located.

perhaps resembled *Jardino* more than any of the other hangouts. Furthermore, when considering these coffee shops the effects of Cairene class dynamics on the goings on of the scene became much more apparent. Whereas my upper and upper-middle class informants were bolstered by their class positions and status in dealing with staff and proprietors at other hang outs, men from the downtown scene fell easier prey to the whims and shifting attitudes of coffee shop owners. As several of my downtown informants have explained, some proprietors would somewhat randomly increase minimum charges in order to ‘filter out unwanted clients’. Such underhanded strategies for ‘filtering out’ gay clientele would not have worked anywhere near as successfully with hangouts such as Ruba simply because a large segment of their clientele could actually afford artificial price hikes. As a result, the gay scene in El Borsa floated somewhat languidly from one establishment to another as their proprietors instigated such strategies of exclusion.

In this section I wanted to discuss the Borsa area I opened the piece with but I particularly wanted to look at how class politics become even more apparent in this area because of its association with men from lower socio-economic backgrounds and so there tended to be an even greater level of instability and I was told that cafes sometimes told men that there was a minimum charge simply to put them off going (sometimes they only charged gay men a minimum charge), a technique that most men told me wouldn’t work as well with Ruba because of their patrons’ ability to actually pay whatever minimum charge was introduced. Furthermore, because this area was full of coffee shops as opposed to bars it attracted a family crowd that was more likely to object to the establishments about gay men and their behavior. As such, specific cafes in the area may have been more unstable than other places but the Borsa area as a whole remained recognized as a gay place as men shifted from one café to another.

Nevertheless, the area was still invested with meaning by gay men even as these exclusionary practices took place. In a sense, I would even argue that it gave rise to various narratives about the area whereby groups of gay friends recounted their banishment from one establishment to another. This shifting

pattern of social engagement then became one of the features of El Borsa as a gay place.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced place as both analytical concept and setting in order to examine the ways in which gay men engaged with place-making in the city and what those efforts meant for the scene as a collectivity. Throughout the chapter I have highlighted the ways in which processes of place making were at once involving embodied experience of and with place and the cultivation of scene specific places through presence and narrative. Furthermore, the process of place making itself shifted and transformed the meaning of gay men's actions. There was a paradoxical element to such efforts at place-making; the greater the visibility and 'sense of permanence' of a particular place the greater the fear that it would one day be transformed into another Queen Boat. The negotiations in place-making exemplify the oscillation between permanence and ephemerality, instability and constancy that characterize the scene's precarious existence.

This, as well as the arguments made concerning narratives in this chapter, tie in with the arguments I make in the following chapters regarding narrativity, camp aesthetics and performance and their centrality to the constitution of the scene as a sociocultural unity and one that had a sense of temporality or continuity in time despite the various experiences of ambiguity and precariousness explicated both in this chapter and earlier ones. While this chapter has focused on place-making as part of on-going efforts at scene-building the following chapters focus on other forms of scene-building.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Narrativity, Historicity and the Scene

So Shahryar rejoiced greatly and said, “’Tis well; go get her ready and this night bring her to me.” The Wazir returned to his daughter and reported to her the command saying, “Allah make not thy father desolate by thy loss!” But Shahrazad rejoiced with exceeding joy and get ready all she required and said to her younger sister, Dunyazad, “Note well what directions I entrust to thee! When I have gone into the King I will send for thee and when thou comest to me and seest that he hath had his carnal will of me, do thou say to me:—O my sister, an thou be not sleepy, relate to me some new story, delectable and delightful, the better to speed our waking hours;” and I will tell thee a tale which shall be our deliverance, if so Allah please, and which shall turn the King from his blood thirsty custom.” (One Thousand Nights and a Night)

So begins the epic One Thousand Nights and A Night tales and Shahrazad’s own tale as eternal storyteller, doomed or destined to enchant Shahryar (as well as listeners) one parable at a time in exchange for her life. Her tale served as the inspiration for a story-telling initiative among gay men in Cairo in the spring of 2011. Ali, the brain behind this initiative was the one to send out a Facebook invitation to an event titled “27ky<sup>73</sup> ya Shahrazade - Long long time ago” or ‘Tell Stories Shahrazade-Long long time ago’. The English language description of the bi-monthly event read as follows:

Long time ago and far far away is a series of alternative queer events, where members of the LGBT community meet to share their experiences and their histories through story-telling, in a tradition very similar to One Thousand and One Nights. It is an effort to save those experiences from oblivion before Shahryar cuts off her head

The event’s description in Arabic was somewhat more elaborate and incisive in its phrasing and read as follows; ‘...as a minority at threat of a moment’s beheading by Shahryar (the government, society, *obreyza*<sup>74</sup>, etc...) we have nothing but our stories. So before we forget our stories and our stories forget

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<sup>73</sup> Pronounced ‘ehki

<sup>74</sup> Gay slang term for ‘police raid’

us we must break the silence and, if they are going to behead Shahrazad, then she should at the very least get to tell her story'. Ali's choice of One Thousand Nights and A Night tales as a point of reference was an attempt to draw delicate parallels between Shahrazad's precarious situation and the scene's own parlous existence. Both are imagined as victims of patriarchal social orders that seek to crush and extinguish any potential for subversion and must both find their salvation in their powers to manipulate and outsmart the dominant order. Shahrazad staves off near-certain death by ensnaring Shahryar in intricately woven and ever more elaborate and captivating tales while, for Ali and the men and women participating in the group, it was their ability to continually tell their individual stories and weave them into more expansive narratives about the scene and its existence that saved both them and the scene from oblivion.

Sadly, since I had already left the field by the time the meetings actually commenced I was only able to attend one of the "27ky" sessions during a post-fieldwork trip. That said however, the event and the session I was able to participate in drew my attention to the importance of narratives to the scene's constitution and the critical role they played in imbuing the scene with a sense of historicity. I arrived for the second ever meeting of "27ky ya Shahrazade" somewhat early to find Ali laying out bottles of soft drink and water in the dining room in preparation for the night's event. Ali had taken it upon himself to host the meetings at the home he shared with his mother and younger brother. Since it appeared that the men joining us on that particular occasion were running late, I took the opportunity to ask Ali about his reasons for bringing together members of the LGBT community for story-telling evenings. He explained that he had felt inspired to create the event after watching a documentary about the AIDS memorial quilt. A massive project that involved piecing together idiosyncratic panels bearing the names of some of those lost to the AIDS virus and bringing them together in a sprawling, vibrant patchwork of remembrance. According to the AIDS memorial quilt website, it was an attempt by members of the community to "...document lives they feared history would neglect..." in the wake of the AIDS

epidemic<sup>75</sup>. For Ali, the quilt represented a community's concerted efforts to come to grips with the devastation wrought on its members by the AIDS epidemic; efforts that not only sought to recognize and in a sense celebrate each individual life lost to the disease but to lace all these disparate histories together into one striking bricolage, a visual representation of collective experience. Ali quickly added that, far from being a model for "27ky ya Shahrazade" in terms of its political aims or efforts to document individual life stories, the AIDS quilt project only served as inspiration for the meetings. In fact, he spoke rather passionately against the idea of documentation, stressing that to focus on transcribing various stories threatened to sap them of their power, to reduce lived experience to case numbers and disjointed anecdotes. He had opted to create "27ky" as a recurring event on Facebook rather than form a group by the same name in order to underscore the experiential character of the initiative and to extend the invitation to as many people as possible. Furthermore, he wanted to underscore the event's temporality; while the creation of a group may have been seen as a powerful statement of presence in the present, somewhat static tense, the creation of a recurring event introduced a much needed sense of temporality, a continuity in time.

This chapter attempts to explore how scene-level narratives allow men to make sense of its precarious situation and to invest it with a sense of continuity and historicity in spite of its perceived instability. As Ali writes in the event description, it is experienced as a scene or community in peril, threatened by a moment's destruction but, as narratives come together in a 'collective memory' of sorts, they ward off this apocalyptic threat. Furthermore, I will attempt to demonstrate how individual life stories and scene-level narratives are mutually imbricated in this process.

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<sup>75</sup> "History of the Quilt." *The AIDS Memorial Quilt*, n.d. <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>.

## **Instability and Uncertainty**

In order to better understand the need for a sense of continuity or historicity to the scene we must return to Ali's earlier depiction of the Cairene gay community as one that is teetering on the brink of disaster. This was by no means an exceptional assessment of the scene among my informants. As stated in the introduction, the Queen Boat raid and trials left an indelible mark in my informants' minds. The images and public as well as official rhetoric surrounding the case at the time highlighted men's banishment to the fringes. Most of my informants described how, as they had overheard family relatives speaking about the case, had read news of the trials and seen the haunting, cloth-covered faces of the men arrested they felt the full force of their alienation from the wider society. While the following excerpt from one of Haitham's blog posts was not specifically about the Queen Boat but about his sense of alienation as he came to grips with his sexuality it nevertheless highlights the sort of feelings that were amplified by the raid. Describing how his parents could not fully understand the stresses and pressures he was under he writes;

“...they weren't aware how pressure affected me when I first dealt with my homosexuality when I was 14 or 15 which...already put me under the same pressure as adults and maybe more! What kind of childhood is that? When you are by yourself in front of Society's & Religion's constant pressure? How was I supposed to feel when society rejects me and all religions curse me?”

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the scene's traumatic experiences with Egyptian authorities and public opinion, that my informants would continually reiterate a certain sense of precariousness but these only represented one security-related facet to the scene's instability. As I have attempted to demonstrate in chapter three, the scene was often depicted as one characterized by internal fragmentation and division. Despite such iterations

and reiterations of instability what I am hoping to explore in this chapter is the ways in which a sense of continuity can be borne through narratives not only to counter this sense of instability but how speaking of such instabilities and past traumas can become group narratives in their own right, can contribute to the constitution of a group history. As men spoke to me about the Queen Boat raid they were in a sense both explaining their reasons for the ever-present and pervasive sense of insecurity they felt both as individual gay men and a group, as well as placing this present-tense of insecurity within a temporal framework.

Speaking of events such as the Queen Boat raid in this way allowed men to imagine the scene as a socio-discursive entity with a sense of historicity that extended far beyond the lives of the individual men making up the scene at any given point in time and the perceived ephemeral character of social relationships that made up the scene in de-temporalized snapshots of it. As I have stated earlier, the vast majority of my informants were men in their twenties and early thirties but this was not simply a feature of my research but a reflection of the general situation on the scene. There seemed to be a palpable absence of older gay men on the scene and particularly men who would have been part of the scene prior to the 2001 crackdown. When in the winter of 2009 a man, Junior, who had been around on the scene prior to the crackdown but had moved abroad following the arrests, had found himself at a night of quiet drinks at Malek and John's with younger scene members he had regaled those attending with tales of the pre-2001 scene. He began talking about the scene as he had known it in the 1990s; he was almost immediately surrounded by the younger men, all of whom were listening intently, hanging on his every word. He explained how he had only been fourteen at the time he had come onto the scene and had started experimenting sexually. He described the gay hangouts and the *salonat* (salons) hosted by certain prominent scene men in their apartments. Each of those salons was named after the person hosting it, or their 'drag name',<sup>76</sup> such as 'Salon Faz'. He

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<sup>76</sup> This is a phenomenon that I will discuss in another chapter where some men are given distinctive 'drag names' that were usually humorous and racy. For example, one of the prominent younger men in the scene known for his sexual promiscuity, vicious remarks and glorification of



added that, back then, they had a very active scene and a ‘clean’ one at that where all the men loved and cared about one another. Junior contrasted this view of pre-2001 scene interactions with what he had heard about the then current situation of friendships and social relationships on the scene.

Despite the fact that men seemed to speak of their experiences with the scene as one juddering move from one unstable state in the present-tense to another, I have attempted to demonstrate how, through a narrative depiction of the scene’s development they were able to attain a certain degree of group-level narrativity where, despite an absence of actual continuity in terms of social relations, a narrated continuity emerged binding them to an imagined scene-past. As they used the Queen Boat as an anchoring event for explanations regarding the scene’s development they were in a sense narrating a history to the scene, establishing a permanence in time, even if such constancy was characterized in those narratives by insecurity and instability. In the following section I would like to focus more closely on the notions of collective memory and collective narrativity.

### **Memory, Narrativity and Historicity**

The arguments regarding continuity and historicity that frame this chapter draw upon Ricoeur’s work on ‘collective memory’ in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Ricoeur 2006). Following from his work on individual identity and narrativity, Ricoeur argues that collective memory is essentially the sum of the sets of memories belonging to a particular group (however narrowly or widely we choose to use the term) against which our own individual narratives unfold. History, in the form of group-level narrated memories, is constructed, collated and shared among group members in order to eventually become a form of ‘everyday knowledge’. This collective memory or shared history, as contrived and artificial as it may appear is nevertheless central to experiences of groupness. I argue that scene-level narratives, such as those

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all vices is called *Fawahesh* which roughly translated to ‘debaucherous sins’ and was deeply connected to religious definitions of carnal sins. Furthermore, the word *Fawahesh* is feminine and so is also a drag name.

relating to the Queen Boat raid and slang to be examined later in the chapter, represent such forms of collective memory; they exist beyond the sexualities of any individual men and are able to incorporate individual men's life histories as part of a collectivity, as personal narratives unfolding within wider collective narratives. What I hope to explore in this section is how these notions of individual and collective narrativity intersect and how we can speak of collective memory.

As an anthropologist, my appearance on the scene was itself a cue for men to weave their lives into narratives or, at the very least, to weave their experiences with their sexualities and the scene into narrative form. Many men joked 'will you please tell my story?' whenever they first found out about my research before launching into accounts of their very first sexual encounters, how they had met gay friends or their first uncertain steps onto the scene. When I met Ziad, for example, for a coffee a couple of months after we had first met at a gay birthday party he almost immediately launched into his 'story'. He spoke in a hushed yet deliberate tone. His experiences with and feelings regarding his homosexuality tumbling out of his mouth in an extended narrative about isolation, confusion and ambivalence. He explained how he had felt alone and confused as he had slowly struggled to come to grips with his homosexuality. He had sunk into a long period of depression, unable to act on his desires and equally unable to discuss matters relating to his sexuality with anyone, be it family or close friends. He explained that his depression was, in no small part, fuelled by religious concerns, having heard time and time again that homosexual sexual acts were *haram* (prohibited) in the Islamic faith. He leaned back into his seat with a somewhat uncomfortable smirk as he said 'let's not kid ourselves by saying it's *halal* (permissible)'. His smile seemed to imply that he knew better than to fool himself into unfounded, albeit perhaps more comforting, readings of Islam with regards to homosexuality. He absentmindedly toyed with the empty, yellow, green and blue sachets of sweetener he had thrown into the ashtray only moments earlier. I asked him what he planned to do in the future or how he tried to reconcile his religious views with his sexuality. He looked conflicted, exasperated and somewhat resigned as he explained that he knew 'it' was

wrong but still felt helpless in the face of his homosexuality, his desires beyond his control. Our short-lived discussion of matters relating to religion came to an uncertain end as he steered the conversation back towards his first sexual experiences and how he had come to find himself on the gay scene.

He explained that it had been two years since he had first starting meeting men and acting upon his desires. He recalled how he had masturbated ten times in one day and still felt unsatisfied, how he had craved real intimacy. At the time, he still felt isolated and alone and had gone online in search of either dates or a ‘cure’ for his homosexuality. He had continued going on these virtual expeditions until one day when he entered ‘gay’ into the search field on Facebook and found one result after another rolling down his open browser’s window, more results than he could have ever imagined. He had only just recently joined Facebook and quickly took down his photos, ‘unfriended’ the handful of friends and family relatives he had added onto his profile and turned it into an anonymous gay profile. He said that he had been on vacation at the time and had gone to bed and woken up to find upward of forty or fifty friend requests from other gay men. He recalled how he had learned to use the website’s chat feature and had started chatting with a twenty-six year old Alexandrian who introduced him to msn messenger and explained to him how things worked in the ‘gay world’. Ziad then laughed as he said “*makontesh ‘araf il mostalahat*” (I didn’t know any of the gay terms). Terms such as ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ and other specifically Egyptian gay slang terms. He never actually got around to meeting his first online friend and, after losing touch, had assumed that he must have switched profiles, erasing his virtual, gay footprint. Despite having never met this Alexandrian friend, he had nevertheless opened Ziad’s eyes to the gay world and introduced him to the scene. Following these online exchanges he eventually began meeting men off the internet and slowly came to find himself at scene parties and get-togethers.

While this was by no means an exhaustive life history, Ziad had bracketed his sexuality into a coherent chronicle of events, accidents and occurrences that had delivered him to the scene. It is perhaps useful at this

point to turn to Ricoeur's views on self, identity and individual narrativity in order to better understand how we may find the concepts of collective memory or collective narrativity useful. In *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1995) Ricoeur explains that one can approach identity or the self as either *ipse*-identity or *idem*-identity where the latter emphasizes the idea of sameness, the notion that there is a core, essential self while the former "implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality" (Ricoeur 1995:2). Rather, an *ipse*-identity, privileges a temporalized conception of the subject or the self as a movement in and through time. This introduction of temporality allows Ricoeur to argue that as agents and subjects we conceive of ourselves and others in much the same way as we conceive of characters and plots in fictive narratives; as characters, we have the capacity to initiate actions, to exhibit a sense of resolve as we move from one life-event to another but, due to life's contingencies and our emplotment in a temporal frame, such capacities are caught in a dialectic that is central to all narratives. As Ricoeur explains;

"This dialectic consists in the fact that following the line of concordance, the character draws his or her singularity from the unity of a life considered a temporal totality which is itself singular and distinguished from all others. Following the line of discordance, this temporal totality is threatened by the disruptive effect of the unforeseeable events that punctuate it (encounters, accidents, etc.)." (Ricoeur 1995: 147)

The synthesis of these elements of concordance and discordance presents itself as absolute necessity in the process of narration, a synthesis brought about by a unifying, temporalized character or subject. Following on from this, Ricoeur argues that such individual narratives intersect with and unfold in conjunction with others' lives and narratives which, for their part, progress and play out in similar processes of synthesis. It is at this point that we can begin to see how collective memory and collective narrativity can emerge; in a sense, we could argue that group narratives (be it at the level of the family, close relations or a scene) precede individual narratives so that personal

stories almost always begin unfolding against a backdrop of wider narratives about those particular groups.

While I would strongly oppose limiting or reducing the concept of the self or subjectivity to its narrative form, I think Ricoeur's explication of the potential for a narrative identity useful in analyzing and understanding not only Ali's motivation for starting "27ky" but the ways in which some of my informants, such as Ziad, chose to narrate their sexualities and how these unravel in tandem with understandings of the scene. For Ali, "27ky" was an opportunity to recognize the importance of individual narratives to the constitution of the scene as a collectivity while for Ziad and other men chronicling their introduction to the scene, it served as an anchor in their process of narration. The introduction of the scene into their narratives signaled a move from experiencing their homosexuality as a form of isolation or alienation from those whose lives they were at the time unfolding with (family, straight friends and so on) to experiencing a narrative unfolding in a collective that is not characterized by isolation and a sense of loneliness. As Hisham, a financial executive in his late twenties, said to me one evening, he had suddenly discovered that he was not alone, that there were other men who were struggling with their sexualities in almost exactly the same way he was.

'Collective memory' or what I prefer to refer to as 'collective narrativity' can be located at the point at which my individual informants' life stories and ones regarding the scene as a whole converge. This point of convergence exists and occurs at the intermediate level between individual recollection of personal stories and wider group histories, it is at this intermediate level that "...concrete exchanges operate between living memory of individual persons and public memory of the communities to which they belong..."(Ricoeur 2007: 127). As Ricoeur writes; "This is the level of our close relations, to whom we have a right to attribute a memory of a distinct kind" (Ricoeur 2007: 127). Basically, at the level of close relations is where we begin to construct or understand wider group-level narratives. I argue that the gay scene represents such a level of social relations, where an affinity between men based on participation in the

scene would prompt events such as “27ky” that seek to mediate these “concrete exchanges” between living memory and collective memory.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which individual stories become intertwined with scene-level narratives it would perhaps be helpful to turn to an interview with one of my informants, Sami, who, a school teacher in his late thirties, was one of my older informants. Sami did not make regular appearances at the parties I attended during fieldwork and I mostly bumped into him at scene hangouts or at smaller gatherings but I was told by several of informants that he was a scene veteran of sorts and one who could shed some light on the scene’s activities during the pre-Queen Boat years. My conversation with Sami took the form of a life history interview and I was particularly interested in how he would explain his relationship to scene and its development over the years. Sami had been born into what he had called a ‘typical, middle class, Christian family’; his mother was a pharmacologist and his father a university professor. Growing up, his family had not been particularly religious and, whilst not heavily immersed in church activities, attended church pretty regularly. While his parents were somewhat traditional he had several uncles who were the ‘liberated artist types’ who regularly criticized his parents’ conservative views and ways. He explained that his uncles had been open in their discussions of sexuality with him in a way that his parents never could have been, breaking many conversational taboos, and that it was when he was in his mid-teens that one of his uncles had stated, in a matter of fact manner, ‘it seems like you’re gay’. Up until that point in his life Sami had thought that he had cleverly masked his inclinations and, despite having experimented sexually with boys, had not really considered the ramifications of or meanings associated with his desires. His uncle’s statement shocked and scared him since he felt, perhaps for the first time, that his sexuality was obvious and clear for everyone to see.

Following his uncle’s statement and during the period of his late-teens he became very religious but developed sexual relationships with one or two of his friends that continued up until he had graduated from university. After leaving university he decided to join the monastic order; he explained that he had

decided to join because he had felt that he wanted to do something meaningful with his life. He had felt that an ordinary life would never be fulfilling for him and that he had had a vast capacity for love that needed some form of outlet and, at the time, had felt that joining a monastery would be the best way of finding a sense of fulfillment. After becoming disappointed with his efforts in Egypt and not finding the sort of fulfillment he had expected he decided to join a monastery in Italy and to study theology. He explained that anyone found to have any homosexual inclinations would have been disqualified from continuing in the monastery and so his period of his study was characterized by an intense fear that he would be found out. He explained how this had been a period of intense anxiety and stress where he would pray and go straight to confession after masturbation. That said however, over the this long two-year period he began seeing men who always appeared to spend their time together but he would not let his mind wander too far or over-analyze what he saw. He said that during those years he would come back to Cairo and would spend time with a group of friends who were mostly leftist political activists who seemed to know about his sexuality but never addressed it directly. He explained that it was during his time with those friends that he felt most like himself and even though they never discussed his sexuality he always felt that he could be himself. It was through that group of friends that he met an openly gay Egyptian man for the first time and while they spent time together their relationship never became sexual. Throughout the period leading up to meeting this man Sami had abstained from all kinds of sexual activity, however, he eventually met another gay man through this mutual acquaintance whom he had sex with after years of denying his sexual urges. He explained that following that sexual encounter he began struggling with conflicting feelings towards the monastic route he had chosen.

It was a year after that sexual encounter that he left the monastery; he explained that it was not because of his sexuality but because he had become disillusioned with the monastic order. The period following his decision to leave his theological studies was deeply colored by an overpowering sense of anger towards God and, in an effort to clear his mind, he had gone to Dahab, a resort town on the Sinai Peninsula. It was during that trip that he first 'made contact

with the Cairene gay scene'; he was at a club one night when he saw three men dancing and gyrating on the dance floor in nothing but skimpy hot shorts and tops and accessorized rather flamboyantly. He could not believe what he was seeing and almost immediately assumed they must be Israeli tourists since he could not imagine Egyptian men being dressed and acting so flamboyantly. He began dancing near them and was shocked to realize that they were in fact speaking Arabic so he struck up a conversation and asked them where they from. After finding out that they were Cairene as well he surprised himself by saying 'by the way, we're like each other'; Sami explained that it was the first time he had ever said anything like that, that he was like those men. As soon as he had told them that he was gay in a rather round about way they welcomed him into the group. It was at that point in the interview that Sami began speaking about the gay scene or "gay society" as he called it. They told him that there were areas where gay men met in Cairo and they began imparting their scene-specific knowledge on the scene newbie.

Sami then began sketching out what the Cairo gay scene was like as he had found it in 1996. He explained that there were a handful of underground hangouts where men seemed to act both flamboyantly and carelessly, stealing kisses and caresses on crowded dance floors, unaware of the impending attack on the scene. When he first made his appearance on the scene he met a young man who, cautioning him against the dangers of the scene and gay Cairenes, had taken him under his wing. He started taking him to a café in the Heliopolis area of Cairo, near the *Jardino* where the two gay proprietors would hire singers and entertainers to entertain an almost exclusively gay crowd until the wee hours of the morning. It was at such hangouts that Sami met not only other gay men but scene stalwarts who were notorious in the 'gay society'. He said that, once he had been introduced to one or two of those notorious scene figures, he became completely immersed in the scene and its goings on to the point that the first gay party he ever hosted was attended by ninety men.

Sami began telling me how the general trend on the scene was for men to descend upon a nightclub on the ground floor of a famous hotel every Thursday night where a female singer performed. That performer not only knew that the



clientele were mostly gay men but knew most of the men by name as well as what Sami called their 'code names' (usually feminized names they used on the scene). Sami explained that, at the time, that nightclub felt like it may have as well have been any gay bar or club in any major European city because of how open and comfortable men were. Most men would stay at that club until around two in the morning when they would move to a house party to continue the nights festivities. Sami explained how certain hangouts would become popular among gay men for some time until news of their clientele spread beyond the scene and that men would usually then move onto other establishments. During this period the police did not seem particularly interested in raiding such places or arresting gay men and only became involved once a crime involving the community in one way or another had been committed. Despite the fact that this was all happening before the 2001 crackdown the appearance of the police to investigate certain crimes was still enough to deter gay men from frequenting certain cafes, bars or nightclubs.

Sami charted the movement of the scene around and across Cairo's hangouts in the late nineties until the Queen Boat became the most popular and widely known establishment among gay men. He explained that one night, as he was hanging out with a few European friends who had come to visit at the Queen Boat, a waiter who had gotten to know him well came over and, in hushed tone, suggested that he may want to leave since there were police camped out the moored boat. Sami described how terrified he had felt as they walked up the gangway from the boat to the exit and how they had attempted to carry on a casual conversation in French in order to elude the police. While the police had only visited the boat that night in order to investigate a scene-related crime and had not intended nor had they actually arrested any men, the incident had rattled Sami to such an extent that he decided then and there in 2000 that that would be his last visit to the Queen Boat. In the months following this incident similar occurrences at other establishments popular among gay men prompted Sami to withdraw almost entirely from such hangouts and to rely instead on a few close friends he had made on the scene. The rest of the interview swayed between what Sami called the 'scene life' and some reflections on his mental and psychological state at the time, at one point even

recalling earlier conversations and confrontations he had had with his parents, particularly his mother, regarding his sexuality. As Sami continued talking it became clear that his narrative had shifted from a chronological pattern to a more relaxed one where he spoke about random and at time unrelated topics, rather than events or points in his life.

If we look over Sami's narrative we can see how, when speaking chronologically, Sami (in a similar way to Ziad) begins with his individual life story, describing both his family background and his personal struggles with his sexuality and how, once he meets the men in Dahab, his narrative begins unfolding against the background of a wider narrative regarding the scene. The moment Sami decided to say 'we're like each other' represented a turning point in the way he narrated his sexuality; he no longer spoke of sexual encounters and fleeting desires and urges but began speaking of a 'we' as well as an 'I'. Even as, later in the interview, he began speaking about random topics, such as class dynamics on the scene or slang, the narrative 'we' and 'I' unfolded together in a way that was markedly different from the initial half of the interview. His individual life story became one of many that shared 'scene life' as their common denominator. The notion of 'scene life' however implies the existence of a wider narrative of the scene and its development and it is those sorts of narratives that I argue allow the scene to create a sense of temporal continuity despite its rather precarious situation.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which certain scene-level narratives operate and the ways in which they are incorporated into a form of 'everyday knowledge' that allow men to speak of a past and future for the scene the following sections will focus on 'gay slang', not as praxis (which will be explored in chapter six) but as a narrative. As men spoke of how this slang repository had come into being they were effectively telling a story of an imagined scene-past, a past that was continually re-inscribed in the present through both the act of narration and through praxis.

### **“Enti Language” or “Loghat El-ti” and ‘Gay Slang’**

I received my education in gay slang terms and 'enti language' (gender-switching in speech) as most new entrants to the scene would, in small snippets and insights that slowly and over time, wove themselves into a fuller understanding of 'scene-camping'. A few slang terms such as *borghol* and *kodyana* (the Arabic slang counterparts to the English terms 'top' and 'bottom' respectively) had made their way into the quasi-mainstream through Alaa El Aswani's bestselling novel *The Yacoubian Building* but the extensiveness of the gay slang repository and its origins remained relatively obscure among those not initiated into the scene. I first noticed and became acquainted with general features of 'enti language'; such as the use of gender-switching in speech practices and the contexts within which such a play with gender was appropriate and then began noticing the use of expressions such as '*shofti?!*', the feminine form of the exclamation 'did you see?!' and meant as a feigned, somewhat sarcastic exclamation of surprise or a response to assertions that were clearly false. The sardonic remark was almost always accompanied by a flamboyant lilt to one side as men sent the pointed thumb and forefinger of one hand up to lightly cradle their chins.

Once I had grown comfortable with *enti* language I began to notice the recurring use of particular words. I first received a definition of one of those terms and learned of the vocabulary's supposed origins over beers with a group of men. Haitham, considered by most of the men at the table as one of the slang's most proficient users, was complaining about a '*budra*' he had been subjected to. Unaware of *budr's* centrality to the scene's terminology and sociality, I asked what the term meant only to be greeted with an almost theatrical eruption of *benag* (another slang term used to refer to high-pitched laughter). Ali was the first to explain that *budr* (verb) is to 'scandalize a fellow queen' or to embarrass her with witty repartee and went on to explain that the origins of gay slang were to be found deep within the heady world of Old Cairo's musicians' quarter and, more specifically, among the female-headed troupes of working class belly dancers and musicians commonly known as '*awalim*.'

‘Gay slang’, the corpus of words and phrases used almost exclusively by gay men and identified as a scene-specific cultural asset of sorts, was regularly incorporated into highly stylized, gendered and in many cases classed performances that made up the bulk of the scene’s day-to-day interactions. During such interactions and performances affected posture, gesticulation and intonation were equally as important as the use of correct terminology since ‘*enti* language’ and the gay vocabulary’s true evocative power was displayed when used with flair, wit and skill, as men drew upon and cleverly invoked prevalent conceptions of taste, gender, propriety and sexuality.

Public perceptions and imaginings of Mohamed Ali Street, at the heart of Cairo’s musicians’ quarter, became increasingly bound up with prevalent sentiments towards the vibrant and at times scandalous communities of ‘*awalim*’ who had moved there at the turn of the twentieth century (Nieuwkerk 2001, Puig 2006). Public perceptions of ‘*awalim*’, mediated as they are through their classed and romanticized depictions in various forms of popular culture (film, theatre, etc.), have and continue to change considerably and concomitantly with economic changes and shifts in perceptions of propriety, morality and taste. The term ‘*awalim*’, used at the beginning of the twentieth century in reference to female dancers and singers who only performed in front of other women, has come to refer collectively to *baladi* (which roughly translates to local and still viewed as somewhat separate from mainstream pop culture scene) dancers and performers, particularly those performing at what are considered *sha’bi* (popular) weddings and public, street festivals (*moulid*). This somewhat romanticized depiction of ‘*awalim*’ as a distinct socioeconomic unit and community gained even greater nuance as many of those dancers left their homes and traditional performing troupes and communities in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s to cater to the Haram Street nightclub and luxury hotel clientele which were emerging as new, flashy entertainment centers at the time. Despite this decentralization of Cairo’s *baladi* entertainment and music industries Mohamed Ali Street retained a certain allure for most Egyptians and became increasingly bound up in a general nostalgic reverence of a time before the supposed disintegration of these vibrant communities (Hammond 2007). //

*'awalim* became part of an Egyptian imaginary that viewed them as a tight-knit community that has and in some ways continues to straddle the bounds of acceptable sexuality, gendered propriety and morality.

In light of the slang's origins, Ali explained, the terms themselves almost always referenced some aspect of *'awalim* life and in the case of *budr* the term was a play on the word *budrah*, the sequins used to embellish a belly dancing costume. As the dancer moved around the stage and amongst the audience, those little sequins and embellishments were meant to pick up the light, reflect and scatter it around to add to the spectacle and accentuate the dancer's movements. So similarly, *budr* amongst 'queens' was supposed to thrill and entice onlookers with its theatricality.

I gained further insight into slang and its centrality to the scene during my first outing on the 'downtown scene' or *'el borsa*'. The maze of *Borsa* pedestrian walkways had melted dizzily into one another as I followed Mohamed, Sherif and Salem. The streets surrounding the Cairo and Alexandria Stock Exchange had been paved and closed off to traffic as part of efforts to renovate and revamp the city's Hausmann-esque downtown area. I was still clutching an A4-sized glossary of gay slang terms that the three men had put together in preparation for my introduction to the 'downtown scene'. Mohamed, an Alexandrian physician in his twenties I had met through the support group meetings, had spent the previous few months working with a UNAIDS project promoting safe-sex practices among at risk communities and had generously offered to take me around some of the cafes in El Borsa and introduce me to some of the men he had met. We made our way through dimly lit alleyways to the buzzing soundtrack of downtown streets flushed with weekend shoppers, walkers, and revelers and as we walked down one of the wider boulevards Mohamed gestured towards the multicolored plastic tables and chairs arranged to one side and said *'di zan'iet el setat'* (this is 'women's alley'). The three men stopped to speak with various groups of café-goers plunged into effervescent clouds of shisha smoke and chatter. Mohamed tossed introductions my way before quickly saying we were meeting other men down another street and ushering me towards yet another turn in the ever growing maze.

The narrower, less neatly paved alley we eventually turned into was as bright as the others had been dark. A brightness doubled and redoubled by a brick wall painted in hues of florescent lime green running along the entire length of the road. Mohamed scanned the rows of plastic chairs and tables laid out on the sidewalk before nodding, waving at a group of four or five young men and making his way over. Once seated, pleasantries and introductions out of the way, Mohamed told me to pass the makeshift glossary around the table in case he and Salem had forgotten any terms and to check for the accuracy of the definitions and translations they had provided. One by one the men seated picked up and scanned the paper. Most nodded approvingly with the occasional knowing and flighty expression of amusement but Shamel, an aspiring actor in his mid-twenties, snatched the paper possessively and with an air of expert proficiency and mastery examined the list of words and definitions running down either side of the sheet of paper before adding a few more terms himself. The glossary was passed around a few more times over the course of the evening as new men drifted over to join our table. As the men spoke to me of 'gay slang' they corroborated Ali's account of its origins in Mohamed Ali Street and took great pleasure teaching me about slang and the ways of '*el borsa*', initiating yet another neophyte into the scene's ways.

What struck me the most about the glossary the men had compiled was that some of the terms attributed to this *gay/ 'awalim* linguistic repository could trace their origins not to Mohamed Ali Street but to English and French words, terms such as *melavwar* for 'partnered' which men traced back to the English word 'lover' and '*tybe*' which they traced back to the French word 'type'. Nevertheless, the realities of language creolization evidenced by the inclusion of such terms seemed to matter little to the narrative expounded by gay men since the sources of particular terms seemed to matter less than their eventual incorporation into 'gay slang' proper and to the imagining of the scene as a particular type of cultural unit. A view that is further bolstered by the fact that men could not fully explain how slang had become appropriated by the scene and the fact that they were not particularly interested in answering such a question; what appeared to matter most to men was that this

linguistic transference had happened and that slang that may have once been used by *awalim* was now specific to the scene and its sociality.

Given that, of the fifty three terms and definitions scribbled into my glossary, only a handful of slang terms were used on a regular basis and given the fact that some of terms were only known to a handful of my informants as well as the fact that certain words were clearly neologisms, I began to think that the narrative surrounding the emergence of slang onto the scene may be just as, if not more, important than its actual use. Therefore, we must divide our analysis of slang between, on the one hand, that of its existence as ‘a thing’ with an attending narrative that can be spoken of, explained and narrated by men and, on the other, its application and use among men (an analysis which will be taken up in chapter six on performance and camp).

### **Collective Narrativity and Forgetting**

Slang, imagined as a scene cultural asset, is, I argue, central to the construction and maintenance of the scene as a socio-discursive unity, particularly over time. To speak of slang as a ‘feature of’ or as something ‘belonging’ to the scene allows men, in the first instance, to speak of the scene and of gay men as a bounded entity, the reality of the ambiguity of its parameters overshadowed and superseded by its appellation as a collectivity. In the second instance, to speak of slang’s history, its appropriation and transformation by gay men is to speak in some ways of a scene temporality and an imagined collectivity, however abstractly defined, that has endured through time. This is of particular importance given the perceived instability and ephemerality of scene relations described both earlier in the chapter as well as in earlier chapters. A historicity borne through narrativity allows men to imagine the scene as a gay collectivity that exists beyond and encompasses the volatile and at times impermanent social connections made by one passing generation of men after another.

In this section I would like to explore how ‘gay slang’ operates as narrative and the various ways in which it allows men to speak of the scene as

a collectivity and to speak of its historicity and to address the question of futurity. An excerpt from a post from Ali's popular blog 'Awkward Sex in the City' introduced in the last chapter can help shed some light on the ways in which notions of remembering and enacting scene culture and the threat of forgetting elements of such a culture are at play in men's experiences of and imaginings of groupness. In the post cited here Ali unleashes a piqued critique of the generation of younger gay men who, much to his dismay, were not only unaware of gay slang but seemed entirely unconcerned about its fate. Such an appeal to remembrance and caution against forgetting elements of scene culture (such as 'gay slang') in this post become ways of speaking of the scene as a collectivity and discursive entity and one that has a history, multiple possible futurities (even if its disappearance is only one such eventuality) and, above all, one that exists in the present-tense. In his highly stylized post 'Before You Tata2abrasto' Ali laments the loss of slang proficiency among younger men on the scene and writes;

It doesn't surprise me that there are girls who aren't fluent in *enti language*...Like a short while ago when we were sitting with a nice girl who had read the entry about the disappearance of men from the city (as Gigi would say 'this bitch of a city where one can't find a single man!') and asked me what *kawaneen* meant? Of course I know there's an age difference and a difference in exposure...that puts girls at different levels of command of *enti language*...but my answer is, *kawaneen* originally means, no offence, 'ovens', 'flaming girls' or girls on fire. And of course it's understandable that girls would be seething from the sexual frustration and deprivation they're subjected to.

So even as my dear girlfriend *budaret* that bitch of a presenter from Before You Get Judged and I thought it was very funny and we sat *nebaneg* until we were blind from laughter I felt that when I wrote about that *budrah*



not all readers would get it. I felt that it was age-specific and specific to a particular socialisation experience. Meaning that, unless you came onto the scene at a certain point of time and at a particular point in time the *kawaneen* from the pre-internet era *budarooki* and you were treated in a certain way and subjected to certain parameters for social interaction (granted they are shitty parameters but nevermind), you won't get a lot of things (It's like *budr* and *enti language* are dying arts—sigh).

While the post reads as a lament of these dying arts it also establishes slang and a specific scene sociality as assets (arts) that could be lost; that the scene, as a sphere of alternative possibility, if allowed, could simply wither and die. The scene becomes above all present as the potential for its loss is lamented. Such an imagining of group sociality, romanticized as it may be, is one way in which a scene narrativity engenders experiences of groupness among gay men. So even as Ali not only writes about slang but other problems facing the scene, such as its generational fragmentation, he nonetheless binds all of these varying elements together in discourse.

Similarly, when Mohamed, Salem, Shamel and those other men had passed around the glossary of gay slang terms, they were channeling the sense of groupness that speaking of shared practices can afford. Together, as they snatched the papers from one another and debated the definitions of certain words, they were engaging in a form of collective narration and remembrance.

Another rather important way in which slang, as one element in a wider scene narrative, operates is through the specific reference to *awalim* and Mohamed Ali Street. This narrative allows men to draw affinities between the scene and *il awalim* as two distinct collectivities but ones that have nevertheless shared a similar banishment to the periphery, to the margins of acceptable society; such affinities then become a meta-commentary of sorts on marginality and propriety where, rather than retreat in shame, both

communities and their posts on the margins are celebrated. Through such forms of association both *il awalim* and gay men are reproduced in men's imaginations as daring, bold, irreverent and subversive yet still manage to exist just on the cusp of society, not exiled nor entirely embraced.

The scene's attraction to Mohamed Ali Street and its performing troupes is perhaps unsurprising once we examine those groups more closely. In Cairo's musicians' quarter, each particular troupe of belly dancers, who mostly lived as well as worked together, was led by an older, established belly dancer who would teach younger girls the tools of the trade. One can see how, for men, parallels could easily be drawn between the ways in which belly dancing tools of the trade were passed down through generations of dancers and the ways in which the scene's tools of the trade (ways of being on the scene) were similarly passed down to newer entrants to the scene (Roushdy 2010). Furthermore, *awalim* and performers, while not considered entirely respectable (particularly since belly dancers were often viewed as fallen women) were still essential to the very fabric of celebratory life. They would be welcomed to homes, engagement parties and weddings to perform, tantalize and enthrall even as those who so eagerly desired their services judged them. The scene is thought to occupy a similar space of liminal existence where they are forced to straddle the bounds of propriety, both challenging and at times subverting gendered norms but only in so far as they remained at the margins of the acceptable. So even though gay men and the scene would certainly be forced even further beyond the margins if they were to come out they still, through a skillful manipulation of their visibility, tried to remain at the outer reaches of propriety.

The affinities drawn between *awalim* and the scene based on a shared marginality I would further argue, allow the scene to gloss over some elements of its internal fragmentation through the imagining of a shared group experience that is based on a celebration of their position at the periphery. The primary internal schism that a shared narrative of slang goes some way to bridge is that based on class. As stated in earlier chapters, the various sub-scenes of the gay community remain largely fragmented along class lines with

limited if any social interaction between sub-scenes but when men spoke of slang they spoke of all scenes. For example, as my informants from upper-middle and upper class socioeconomic backgrounds spoke to me about slang they would often say that men on the 'downtown scene' were much more proficient and knew more of the vocabulary. Even as they claimed to be at categorically different levels of gay slang proficiency they nonetheless asserted that they shared the vocabulary. So while class demarcations continually broke down the scene into ever smaller pieces the narrative regarding slang offered one way in which men could speak of and experience a groupness that, whilst fully mindful of class divisions, nonetheless acknowledged a certain fraternity. For example, when I marched into The O Bar the first night I left *El Borsa* with my newfound store of slang terms in hand in the form of the makeshift glossary I immediately began asking men from scenes other than the 'downtown scene' about the new words I had learned. They seemed to know a large number of words but didn't use all the ones they did know to equal degrees and there were other terms they had never heard before and still more they vehemently said they would never use even if they were part of a gay slang vocabulary. Mohamed, a nineteen-year-old I had met at one of Haitham's gatherings, had, for example, twisted and contorted his face into an expression of disgust as he handed me back the glossary protesting that some of the terms were just 'too vulgar'. Several other of the young men at the table seemed to nod in faint agreement. Those men's rejection of certain terms for their perceived vulgarity one could argue, in one way, entrenches internal scene divisions through an implicit assertion woven into their reactions of disgust, namely that they were a 'different type of gay man' who would never use such offensive language. While those reactions certainly meant to demarcate the boundaries of the two sub-scenes and to position them as separate, the glossary still offered a way of speaking of an imagined, wider collectivity that still tethered the two sub-scenes to one another.

## Conclusion

The chapters thus far have examined the ways in which various forms of instability have plagued the scene and its development; the 2001-2004 crackdown on the community (and in particular the raid on the Queen Boat), the inner fragmentation of the scene as well as the uncertainties linked to efforts at place-making. Nevertheless, through the discussion of place-making in the previous chapter we see that, despite such instabilities, there were still efforts at cultivating spaces for scene interaction and by extension, the cultivation of the scene/s themselves. This chapter has focused on yet another facet to scene cultivation or scene building efforts.

The crackdown on the scene in the early 2000s was discussed by my informants as a rupture in the historical development of the scene, it brought the development of the scene to an abrupt halt, shattering hopes that it could develop any further. The result of this blow to the scene's progress was that men often spoke of the scene as ephemeral, existing in a precarious, ahistorical state. This chapter argues that we could nevertheless look at various forms of narratives as attempts at countering this sense of ephemerality, as attempts to bring the scene together. For example, as men discussed the scenes' appropriation of *awalim* slang for their own purposes, the development of *enti language* use and even the potential loss of such cultural scene assets they were creating a sense of history to the scene, asserting its existence even as it undergoes changes and even as it faces perilous challenges. Furthermore, as they spoke of such assets as belonging to a wider definition of the scene, as one encompassing both the upper upper-middle class scene and the downtown scene they were creating . Furthermore, such a narrative allowed men to draw upon the history of Mohamed Ali Street and to draw affinities between the scene's marginal position and that of Mohamed Ali Street performers, adding to the historicity of the scene and positing the scene's history as one of the marginalization of communities.

The scene acts as a narrative anchor in men's stories about their sexual development and, as such, those individual stories and life histories come

together in one bigger narrative about the scene as a whole. In addition to meta-narratives regarding language and the destruction of the 1990s scene at the hands of Egyptian authorities those individual stories weave themselves into a different form of scene-wide narrative.

## CHAPTER SIX

### ‘Camp’ and the Cultural Makings of a Scene

The hall’s unevenly plastered walls seemed to reverberate and shudder with every boom of the drums as though trying to absorb the acoustic onslaught but only momentarily before volleying it thunderously back into the room. As the evening progressed, the tiny hall, with its fraying carpets, wobbly wooden chairs, clunky steps and enthralled occupants, felt ever far removed from the bustling city at its doorstep. The majority of musical pieces followed a similar, almost formulaic, trajectory. They began with soft, quiet drum taps peppered with and accented by the occasional ting of zills (*sagat*) and slowly built to a cacophonous crescendo, its rumbling roar grounding to an abrupt halt at the end of every piece.

Zar ceremonies, ubiquitous in various forms of Egyptian popular culture (such as film, fiction and theatre), were traditionally performed as exorcisms in cases of spirit possession or as healing rituals to battle ailments wrought on by witchcraft and black magic. The afflicted would seek the help and services of zar specialists who would then use rhythmic beats, dance, song and in some cases chanting, to exorcise their demons. Sometime before I began research a group of zar practitioners formed a performing ensemble and managed to cleverly package traditional zar music into performances to be aligned with other forms of folkloric practice (Egyptian Center for Culture and Art). *Mazaher*, the female headed troupe, soon gained a steadfast following among young Egyptian urbanites and tourists willing to wander slightly off the beaten path. Ali and Gigi had made regular trips to *Mazaher’s* weekly performances and were the ones to take me and four other men along on that particular night.

Following a short intermission, our group split up as Gigi and Hani darted for and grabbed two of a limited number cushions strewn at the front of the hall and the rest of us were left hovering on the mezzanine level above. A somewhat heavysset woman in her mid-to-late forties with a commanding presence and a

conspiratorial smile, Umm Sameh, the apparent head of *Mazaher* and its lead performer, appeared to be the prototypical *baladi* woman. She stood in the warm blaze of five spotlights dressed in a loose, colorful *galabeya* and a sheer black veil that fell down the sides of her face and all the way down to her stomach. She threw a glance and smile of acknowledgment in Gigi's direction as she started singing to a backdrop of soft drum taps. A mischievous smile crept across her face as she sang the slow segment of the song, her playful eyes darting in Gigi's direction before shooting briefly in ours in time for her to sing "*ya hawanem*" ('you ladies'). Malek, who had been stood at one end of the hall, quickly made his way over to me and, giggling under his breath, whispered "*Gigi etbadaret*" (Gigi has been 'bitched out' or 'outed'). The glances thrown in our general direction and several others timed to deliver similar teasing jabs at the group's homosexuality made more sense when I later found out that Umm Sameh had gotten to know both Gigi and Ali quiet well and had quickly sussed out their sexuality. The men were thrilled and amused by Umm Sameh's knowing jabs and perhaps even more importantly, they were impressed by her artful delivery. It is incredibly difficult to articulate precisely what it was about her delivery that thrilled my informants and I so much but, rather ironically, I suspect that it was precisely our inability to identify, put into words and, in a sense, objectify our experience of her delivery that made her performance particularly special. It seemed seductive, ambivalent and cautiously cryptic. Umm Sameh had managed to imbue the lyrics she sang on a weekly basis with additional layers of meaning and communicative possibility with the simple flick of an eye in our direction. She had managed to deliver what my informants would refer to as *budrah* with such impressive stealth using minute gestures and plays with language and intonation that allowed her performance to be understood and perceived by my informants through a scene-specific interpretive lens. Her plays with and in comportment, language and humor and the wider context within which the performance took place (as a 'refashioning' of a 'traditional community practice' into a performance or spectacle) I would argue, fit in so perfectly with a form of 'camp aesthetics' so central to scene sociality that her performance came to be easily incorporated into my informant's imaginings of the scene as an unfolding, sociocultural entity.

This chapter attempts to present and analyze various elements of this camp aesthetic tradition and the ways in which those relate to the imaginings of the gay scene as a sociocultural, discursive unity over time. I will examine the use of ‘*enti* language’ (*enti* is the feminine form for the pronoun you), an umbrella term that is used to refer to both a specific ‘gay slang’ vocabulary and more general language games that rely primarily on plays at and with gendered syntax, and the scene practice of *budr* as entry points into an analysis of the ways in which different experiences and interactive modalities come together to imbue the scene with a sense of subcultural identity. As forms of cultural capital and a practical, everyday, scene-specific knowledge that men only come to learn, engage with and practice through their involvement with the scene they become markers of the scene's sociocultural parameters and, in a sense, offer a way of relating to the question of what it means to be gay, part of a gay scene or even community, as an engagement with a certain socialization project. I argue that, while on most of my informants' minds, questions of identity politics and the establishment of a gay rights platform in Egypt is secondary to their understanding of the gay scene or scenes as sites or spaces for an alternative sociality and, perhaps as importantly, one that is in a constant state of flux, rebirth and transformation.

### **Language, Camp and Performance**

As the previous chapter on narratives has highlighted, gay slang and the wider speech patterns of ‘*enti* language’ played a rather crucial role in the ways in which men related to one another as part of a collectivity. When analyzing gay slang we must begin by situating the actual terminology within a broader framework or view of *enti* language as general speech practice. Similarly, when we speak more generally of language usage among gay Cairenes (*enti* language and slang) we must situate such usage in relation to the highly stylized, gendered and at many times classed performances that make up the bulk of the scene’s day-to-day interactions of which language is only one element. Such performances are the cornerstone of scene day-to-day interactions; as with slang, men slowly learn when and how to add a flamboyant or effeminate gesture or movement to their utterances to emphasize their speech, particularly when using



the feminine form of *enti* language. In this chapter I hope to illustrate two main interrelated ways in which this camp aesthetic operates on the scene; in one way, and as alluded to earlier, it operates as a form of in-group code of behavior, allowing men to cultivate a sense of togetherness. In a second and connected way, one way in which this sense of groupness is established and strengthened is through this camp aesthetics' alternative take on ideas of gendered norms and morality.

In their interactions with one another men seem to model their behavior after prototypical, caricatured and hyperbolic forms of femininity. Most times, my informants seemed to be channeling the general speech practices and *habitus* (albeit in exaggerated form) of strong, working class women who, like Mohamed Ali Street's belly dancing matriarchs and Um Sameh in the opening vignette, are thought to be perspicacious, cunning, sharp-witted and sure-footed.

Given the nature of these performances, the gender-subversive nature of *enti* language and the highly exaggerated nature of most utterances and gestures it is perhaps unsurprising that, in my analysis of men's modes of interaction, I was almost immediately drawn to the extensive literature on camp. As an analytical concept 'camp' has been the topic of much discussion and fervent (at times divisive) debate since the publication of Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, in which she attempted to chart out and explicate features of camp aesthetic (Sontag 1964). Since then much of the debate has centered around various attempts at defining 'camp', the extent to which camp could be considered political if at all and whether camp was an exclusively gay form of aesthetic expression or apprehension (Babuscio 1994, Meyer 1994, Newton 1979). This chapter is not an attempt at defining camp nor is it intended as an interjection into any of the debates surrounding the term but simply for the purposes of my arguments I would only like to stress that would seem to be more productive, analytically speaking, would be to speak of the various things camp **could** be or the forms it **could** take. So we can, following Newton's definition, think of camp as a mode of aesthetics that at times exhibits incongruity in terms of subject matter, a certain theatricality of style and employs humor strategically (Newton 1972). Similarly, Zwicky's list of general characteristics of camp is helpful in

understanding camp as style and modes of relating to language and performance. Zwicky lists some of those characteristics as “subjective stance, irony/sarcasm (distancing, saying and not saying, “not taking seriously”), resistance, subversiveness, double/triple/etc. vision, metacommentary...” (Zwicky 1997, 28).

Everyday interactive performances and exchanges regularly employ and exhibit many of the features associated with a camp aesthetic that men are in many ways socialized into through their involvement with the scene. Consequently, the regular use of such performances and participation in scene-specific practices such as *enti* language and *budr* (the ritual exchange of snippy remarks and retorts) are not only ways in which groupness is experienced but how men continually re-invest the scene as cultural being with power. The scene, as the space for an alternative, excitingly illicit form of sociality can then offer men new ways of relating to the group and the notion of a collectivity as well as, at times, challenge dominant conceptions of gendered propriety.

Similar to the way in which research into ‘gay language’ has demonstrated how “in conversation amongst themselves, gay men and lesbians, it is argued, often produce themselves as members of particular identity categories, circulate and consolidate their experiences and project the existence of a community that seeks to cross ethnic, geographical and historical space” I would like to examine and analyze the ways in which the performances mentioned earlier as well as the use of slang bind men together and to the scene (Harvey 2002, 1146). In this sense then camp becomes a stylistic device that, when used by men, binds them together through mutual understanding of its function and its powers. As Harvey adds, “Here, language is not simply viewed as a collection of lexical traps and absences that confound the speaker, but as a resource that allows a more subtle reconfiguration of meaning, through allusion, intertextuality, irony and co-operative humor” (Harvey 2002, 1146). So I would, as Harvey does following from Livia and Hall’s work, stress gay language’s importance as a form of “cooperative discourse behavior, where ‘co-operative’ is used to refer to shared underlying assumptions of meanings, values and their

encodings” (Harvey 2002, 1147)<sup>77</sup>. This element of camp and camp talk can perhaps be best demonstrated through an examination of *budr* on the scene, the sport-like exchange of insults and joking, petty remarks. Analyzing *budr* is perhaps one of the most helpful ways of differentiating between ‘gay slang’ as an objectified element of scene-wide narratives and its use in camp interactive practices. When the men I met around the downtown scene offered up the hand-written glossary and helped me add even more terms over the course of the night they appeared to be speaking of slang in the former sense, as an object of sorts. They certainly assumed that I would need to learn some key terms in order to be able to follow conversations, mainly terms that referenced day-to-day interactions on the scene, but, for the most part, they were interested in supplying me with as many terms as possible even if those were only rarely, if ever, used by men themselves. Examining *budr* interactions allows us to look at the ways in which **some** slang terms are actually used but, perhaps more importantly, it allows us to look at how a more general, camp aesthetic framework is active in scene practice and how slang along with enti language are utilized in such group praxis to further the scene-specific form of cooperative discourse described earlier.

The first time I directed a *budrah* at Haitham was as unplanned and unstrategic as most of them are or are meant to be. I had spent the first few weeks of fieldwork observing group interactions, getting used to the exchange of fiery jokes but politely resisting to partake in the activity whenever other ‘more established queens’ urged me to ‘get my claws out’. That night however, the words seemed to hang and linger in the air, like the decisive crack of a whip, even as I attempted to drown them in swift apologies. The coffee shop was laid out on the sidewalk of a busy Zamalek street so the jittering flow of traffic and steady whirr of other patrons’ conversations offered some respite from the moment’s awkwardness. I had only just met most of the men seated in a wonky circle of chairs but had known Haitham, at whom the biting riposte was directed, for a little over a month. I was almost certain I had made a terrible mistake when I saw Haitham’s usual smirk replaced with wide-eyed disbelief and heard the

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<sup>77</sup> For a critical review of gay and lesbian language see Kulick 2000.

other men gasp in unison. It was not until they started laughing and Ess started clapping that I realized I had not made such a fatal mistake.

Haitham had meant to challenge me for a clever comeback when he said ‘oh I’m sure you must be turned on by men’s legs because of your height’. This was meant as dig at my short stature. The light jab, delivered in Haitham’s idiosyncratic monotone, was issued as though it were a cool, objective statement of fact. I had not even had a chance to fully consider my own words when I surprised Haitham, myself and the other men seated at the table with ‘given how much time you spend on your knees most people would think you’d be just as interested in legs’. Haitham blinked back a stunned smile while several of the other men, who regularly found themselves on the receiving end of Haitham’s razor-like tongue, laughed and cheered.

Like camp itself, *budr* is elusive in its character and my informants themselves were hard-pressed to offer up definitive characteristics of a successful *budrah* whenever I urged them to do so. Like camp, it is context-specific and ever-changing. A *budrah* must appear daring, scandalous and clever but must never sound overtly antagonistic or mean-spirited. If a comment ever breaches those general bounds of *budr* acceptability it ceases to be a *budrah* and is instead considered an outright insult. Since I was still unsure at the time as to what sort of *budr* was considered acceptable among my circle of informants I felt that the comment I had directed at Haitham had perhaps breached the bounds of *budr* acceptability.

While, as stated earlier, *budr* does not lend itself so easily to attempts at its definition, one of its most consistent and enduring characteristics is that it almost always utilizes enti language. In fact, I cannot recall nor have I recorded in my fieldnotes any instance where enti language (the general grammatical feminization of utterances) was **not** used in one form or another. This is perhaps the primary reason why an analysis of *budr* readily lends itself to discussions of camp. If we then understand camp, as Harvey proposes, as a discursive device “...motivated by a playful and subversive take on sign-making that encompasses aspects of register play, reversal of expected outcomes and encodings, and

parody” then we can better understand how it can at times be a form of resistance against heteronormativity but that it is the play, the parody or its irony that is of primary concern to its users (Harvey 2002: 1149). It is, as stated earlier, the shared interpretation or understanding of semiotics and the echoic nature of utterances and insults that allows *budr* and its internal camp logic to become a means for co-discursive practices within the scene.

In order to illustrate the use of *budr* in the scene’s day-to-day interactions the following is an example of an exchange between several of my informants during a night out in the city. We were stood at the raucous bottom of the dilapidated cement block housing the O Bar at the Borsa’s doorstep. The street was a magmatic buzz of coffee shop activity, clothing store racks that had either spilled out onto or were set up on the street and the satisfied and dissatisfied audiences of a midnight movie showing that had just ended at the movie theater down the road.

Gigi had stealthily spotted Shadi earlier that evening on a contrastingly deserted street, weaving his way through rows upon rows of cars that had been parked and tucked in for the night. The road was drained of almost all light and activity but for a fruit selling stall grimly lit by one single light bulb, a tiny corner shop and the occasional moving car or pedestrian. Gigi had stood, perched on one of the many cement boulders littering the asphalt when he saw Shadi. He tilted his head up, raised one limp wrist and, pointed finger wagging lightly, gently yelled “*ana arfa el farasha el mashya henak di!*” (I know that butterfly walking over there<sup>78</sup>). Shadi, amused and genuinely glad to see Gigi, began walking over. Gigi raised his hand again fingers splayed exaggeratedly in Shadi’s direction and explained that he could not have missed the bright, salmon pink hoodie Shadi was wearing. We had not realized Shadi had been walking with another man weaving his way through another maze of parked vehicles. While Shadi laughed at Gigi’s quip, Buffy, not to be outdone in flamboyant dress, walked up behind him in an even more attention-grabbing outfit. Gigi threw one obvious look of amusement over the bright, near electric blue hoodie Buffy was

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<sup>78</sup>‘Know’ was used in the feminine form and ‘butterfly’ is a feminine noun.

wearing zipped down to show off his bare chest and a stick-on tattoo in the shape of an anchor at the base of his neck. Gigi took even greater pleasure making several more quips about their brightly colored and not-so-subtle hoodie choices throughout the rest of the conversation.

After minutes of indecisive chatter, we ended up at the O Bar where both Shadi and Buffy weathered further barrages of predictable and predictably humorous jabs at their choice of dress. Some men fired underhanded remarks such as “*ya helwa, eih el enti labsah dah?*” (‘sweetheart<sup>79</sup>, what are you wearing?) It had only been a little over a week since the fight had broken out at the O Bar<sup>80</sup> and we had expected subdued, if any, ‘gay activity’. The somewhat tense, blemished lobby had certainly promised as much; a bored police officer sat by a metal detector, presumably a shadow of its former self, as we made our way through to the elevators and had even stopped Gigi when the detector sputtered to life with a discontented beep. We learned that our expectations had been miscalculated as soon as the rickety elevator doors wheezed open and were almost immediately met with high-pitched, exaggerated, gurgling laughs, flailing, flamboyantly limp gestures and practically no place to stand let alone sit.

After milling about the bar without finding a place to sit we decided to leave in search of another venue for the night. Standing on the sidewalk at the entrance to the hotel Gigi, Ali, Shadi and Amer began arguing over our next destination and, before long, the exchanges turned into a series of *budr* strung together by loud bouts of laughter and the occasional reference to the groups enduring indecision. ‘They’ve added a star’ Shadi mentioned offhandedly as he pointed towards the reception area. I scanned the wall for the small wooden plaque bearing the hotel’s star rating only to realize that he had been making a quip about stars lining the shoulders of the new police officer stood by the door. Ali laughed and added “*la’ dole zawedo nagafa! Bolice el kawaneen nagafa!*” (No they’ve added a chandelier! The fag/fruit police use chandeliers!) to a loud bout of laughter. They howled loudly with *benag*<sup>81</sup> and *entis*, throwing their

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<sup>79</sup> Sweetheart was used in the feminine form.

<sup>80</sup> Referenced in the chapter on place-making.

<sup>81</sup> *Benag* is the plural slang term for loud, cackling laughs.

heads back. Shadi then feigned concerned disapproval regarding their ‘flamboyance’ and said ‘not on the street, we can do that upstairs but not here’ and glanced at a group of middle-aged men sitting only a few feet away on a bench. Ali retorted with ‘they (the rest of the *kawaneen*) are all upstairs, we’ll give them one ring and they’ll all be down here’. Amer lifted his hands up to his face, looked up towards the rooftop bar and let out a half-hearted, pretend-yell “*ya banat!*” (Girls!). Ali joked “*hatla’i ‘azayez el beera nazla!*” (You’ll find bottles of beer dropping from the sky!) and, with his fingers pursed together, brought his right hand down, mimicking the drop of bomb-like bottles of beer.

The ‘girls’ took turns throwing snide, joking remarks at one another, waiting for coveted laughs of approval and amusement followed by witty spars in return. At one point Shadi, poking fun at Gigi’s indiscriminate sexual behavior, said that ‘she was so cheap’ that “...*beyhotooha maganan ‘al tarabeza*” (they set her on tables for free like sauces). Gigi, notorious for only realizing his quips had backfired once he had already uttered them, retorted with a slight laugh and “*aiwa, yoqalab wa yoqadam sakhenan!*” (to be stirred—but in Arabic the word can also mean ‘flipped over’—and served hot!) and Ali added “or cold!” with a wag of the finger and an exaggerated, knowing glance. The flamboyant quips were becoming even louder and Amer, looking sheepishly around at late night crowds, somewhat hesitantly and somewhat jokingly said ‘we should keep it down or we’ll get beaten up’. Gigi threw his hands up in protest and warned “*la’a! Adereb fi ‘odet el nome mesh fil share’!*” (No! I only get beaten in the bedroom not on the street). This line of witty banter inevitably ended with a snide remark about Gigi’s buttocks but they used the gay slang term *kara*, which would best be translated to ‘ass’. Shadi, a devious smile creeping across his face, said ‘her ass is so vast (in reference to Gigi’s promiscuity) we would probably feel lonely’. Gigi, not to be beaten, feigned a look of strained concern and said ‘no, you’ll find the rest of your friends in there, play with them!’

These exchanges were more or less typical of *budr* verbal sparring; they played with notions of femininity, masculinity, the scene’s visibility and questions of promiscuity and propriety. Above all, the exchanges almost always

employed a humorous, tongue-in-cheek approach to whatever was being discussed. It is this echoic and ironic nature of such exchanges that fits in so comfortably within a wider framework of camping. As Harvey notes, camp is a citational device that often, if not always, calls upon prevalent conceptions and general views regarding sexuality, gender and morality in its critique of those very ideas and their apparent solidity (Harvey 2002). It is through the use of “quotation, mimicry...gender inversion, trenchant put downs, and bad puns” (Van Leer 1995: 20) that camp is able to highlight the ways in which our stringent approaches to notions of normativity are essentially absurd. When my informants played around with gender-inversion or classed performances they not only critiqued the systems of heteronormativity that placed them in a position of ‘inferiority’ but also highlighted the absurdity of their necessary involvement in those systems and through their shared understanding of the specificity of this form of camp play to the scene it becomes a way of solidifying a sense of groupness through shared practice and discourse.

So, for example, when Amer, Shadi and Ali play-berated Gigi for his ‘loose ways’ they utilized normative understandings of propriety and a negative judgment of female promiscuity (since Gigi was feminized in their speech) but because it was camped through humor, exaggeration and parody it became a co-discursive queer practice that above all highlighted the importance of this form of exchange rather than its potential for resistance. Gender-inversion and camp then becomes a style of discourse that allows men to relate to one another distinctly as scene members, as gay men who are ‘in the know’.

Another example of such exchanges, this time from the downtown scene, could perhaps shed even greater light on how this form of in-group practice, with its use of gender-inversion and plays with aggression and passive-aggressiveness, becomes important for creating a specific form of interactional understanding. While my informants, from almost all class-backgrounds, mostly cited and mimicked the performative styles of what they considered ‘vulgarized forms of femininity’ associated with *awalim* there were some instances where similar forms of camping were used in relation to other forms of femininity and understandings of propriety further highlighting the importance of camp as game



and intertextual play in performance in scene interactions, regardless of the ideals being cited and played with. On one of my very first outings on the downtown scene I found myself sitting at a coffee shop in Borsa with Shamel and Michael, who soon began their usual game of *budr* banter. I found myself caught in the playful crossfire as they both spoke to me but directed their witticisms at one another. George began by grabbing my arm and raising his other exaggeratedly limp wrist, pointing at Shamel and saying “*di rebayet shaware*’, ‘*aref, betnam al-raseef!*” ‘she was raised on the streets, you know, she sleeps on the pavement!’. Shamel then retorted with a smile, lightly grabbing my other arm, and saying ‘I sleep on the street but she sleeps on the asphalt and when I turn over in my sleep she says ‘be careful you’re going to fall on me’ and he then let go of my arm in order to act out rolling off the side of a pavement. Each spoke through an upturned nose as through disgusted by the other’s lowliness and as through their attempts to speak to me were in fact attempts to ignore the others’ existence. They feigned distinctly feminine, haughty attitudes as each accused the other of being a member of the ‘working class’. In reality, both Shamel and Michael were quite good friends and acknowledged that they came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Their *budr* exchanges allowed them to satirize not only accepted notions of femininity and masculinity but the socioeconomic realities to which they found themselves subjected within the scene and beyond. While their socioeconomic realities certainly played a role in the forms of the *budr* they chose to partake in and in their imaginings of the feminine prototypes they attempted to embody what remained constant was their understanding of its artificiality and their understanding that meanings negotiated through their interactions are not fully apprehended as such by onlookers. Other coffee shop patrons would, for example, simply view Shamel and Michael’s gender-inversion as a form of effeminacy rather than as a play in and with camp.

As the evening progressed and we were joined by one of Shamel’s friends, Mamdouh, and Juhara, another gay man I had met during an earlier outing in the Borsa area, Shamel and Michael continued their verbal sparring. The area had slowly quieted down as various coffee shops rounded up their plastic furniture and shut their doors for the night so Shamel suggested that we move to Korba. Michael opposed the move in a rather theatrical manner and, in

his usual exaggerated style, explained that he lived around that area and that he would not want to be spotted. Shamel's friend then joked by saying "*enti mabdoora henak, ehna mesh mabdooreen*" (you're<sup>82</sup> outed over there, we aren't). Then Michael, waging a limp wrist and an extended index finger and speaking in the feminine form, squeaked 'I live over there, we can't do it'. As men relented and suggested we go hang around the *Jardino* instead he pretended to perk up and said 'let's go to *El Jar* and get arrested, I hear they even have hot men in lock-up', then as though speaking of a rare delicacy added 'I hear they picked them up from Alexandria'. By that point Michael had been speaking pretty loudly for quiet some time and in the feminine form not realizing that the men who operated the coffee shop were sitting in a darkened corner a few meters behind him. Shamel's friend then looked over at him and said 'simmer down, the men working here are sitting right behind you' but he made the mistake of speaking in *enti*, feminine form yet again so Shamel shot him a stern look and reminded him that there weren't any girls around. By that point we had been joined by yet another friend of Shamel's, Hani. It was only at that point that Michael noticed the men sitting behind him and, still speaking in an overtly feminine manner and covering his face in a flamboyant expression of shame, said 'no no no, I can't believe it. I've gone weak at the knees!' One of the bemused men then piped in saying 'we didn't hear a thing but calm down because of the neighbors' but as he spoke he addressed Michael in the feminine. Deciding that they had made quite enough of a spectacle of themselves the men decided to move the night's outing to the *Jardino*.

Shamel, myself and Hani piled into Mamdouh's car for the trip to Heliopolis while Juhara rode with Michael. The trip from downtown to the *Jardino*, which would have taken the better part of an hour during light traffic, flew by as Mamdouh zipped through the late-night, deserted streets at breakneck speed to the booming soundtrack of a dance track. Mamdouh's whirlwind driving got us to the *Jardino* in less than a quarter of an hour but, as we had arrived before Michael and Juhara, he began circling the area. It wasn't until a few laps later that we spotted Michael's car slowly edging its way down the

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<sup>82</sup> For the following ethnographic account of that evening's events words underlined would have been used in their feminine form in Arabic.

other side of the boulevard. Mamdouh slammed his foot on the gas pedal and zoomed around to the other side of the road and, feeling like we should perhaps indulge in a typical Jar-like chase, began gaining on Michael's car only to fall behind a little then speed up again. When Mamdouh eventually brought us alongside Michael's car at one end of the Jardino, Juhara rolled down the passenger window and stuck his head out of the moving car and with his long curls flying around both awkwardly and wildly, pretend screamed 'what do you want from us?!' as though they were incensed girls being harassed by strange men on the street. Juhara's antics and his dramatic portrayal of faux-indignation sent Mamdouh, Shamel and Hani into fits of laughter.

When we eventually parked by the side of the road and stood at the foot of one of the lampposts dotting the sidewalk Shamel and Michael yet again launched into a scathing *budr* match but this time directed most of their comments at Juhara. It all started when, spotting a police van nearby, Juhara exclaimed 'there it is, there's the police van, it's going to pick us all up'. Shamel then said 'what van you suspect looking girl?!'. Michael decided to chime in with 'I don't know why this one is always so worried. We have a whore standing here with us'. Because of the feminization of their sentences both comments were meant to imply that Juhara's fears were only fuelled by the fact that 'she' was a whore but that they, as respectable girls (because of how they had spoken of themselves in the feminine form), were certain of their propriety and so had no need to worry about the police. Prickling at their insults, Juhara said 'no no, you're insolent', again using the feminine form of the adjective he directed at Michael. Michael fired back with a giggle and 'she isn't just a whore, she even comes with a heating option down there'. Then, spurred on by the other men's laughs and again directing the *budrah* at Juhara, he added 'now there she is, the one who took a *mikiad*<sup>83</sup> and lost it (in her loose hole). No, actually it came out all chaffed, lost all its skin'. Shamel then expressed a false sense of concern as he said, 'oh no, only the muscle came out?' with a theatrical sense of seriousness. Following Shamel's interjection and, noticing that Juhara had gone quiet (perhaps taking the *budr* to heart) Michael said that maybe it was enough but

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<sup>83</sup> The gay slang term for penis.

something in his tone implied that this was yet another false assertion. And sure enough, Michael quickly added ‘one more *budrah* and that’s it. Well, lets give her a break...ok, break’s over’. All the other men, apart from Juhara that is, were giggling throughout the foregoing exchanges and bursting into little fits of laughter at some of the particularly scathing retorts. Michael started telling Juhara that ‘she’ had had enough of a break but just as he was about to launch some other *budrah* in ‘her’ direction, Shamel jumped in and said ‘now you’re playing during overtime’. Michael then quickly turned to Shamel and said ‘what is this overtime you’re talking about sister? overtime as in football?’ and without waiting for a response and in a high-pitched affected manner added ‘I really wish we could play football. I swear, seriously, imagine the girls running after the ball’. Michael rounded off his statement with an effeminate shimmy. Then, pretending to be one of those girls on the pitch, he tipped one shoulder forward in what the other men would understand as a feminine plea and added ‘each one of them will say—c’mon pass it over, c’mon pass me the ball and I’ll give you his number’. Shamel decided to join into painting a verbal caricature of that imaginary football game and added ‘oh and that one who’ll have to stand as goalie, she’ll stand there chewing on a piece of gum’. Michael said ‘no, our goalie will have to wear a galabeya, so that she could spread her legs and catch the ball’. Then turning to the other men as though to give them instructions on how to play the game Michael put on a serious tone as he said ‘and you can’t wear heels for the game. Flat trainers have to be worn for the games, ballerina flats no’.

Then, turning his attention to Juhara once more, Shamel said ‘yes, like those ballerina flats that you were wearing. Yes, those smelly ones’. Juhara looked somewhat embarrassed and uncomfortable, a strained smile creeping across his face. Shamel then looked over to his friend Mamdouh and said ‘you know those shoes old women wear around, fabric shoes with slight heels on the bottom. She was wearing those around with what could have easily passed as a skirt. I kept making fun of her, making fun and making fun of her and told her to take them off. Oh she did, and how I wish she hadn’t?!’ At that point Juhara retorted with an aggressive ‘c’mon you daughter of a faggot!’. Michael then joined in with a cackle and ‘that’s when we found out how Juhara managed to drift off to sleep

every night'. Shamel added 'she'd take off her shoes and pass out immediately. Oh my God! She took them off and I could see fumes rising off her feet!' It was at that point that Juhara began moving away from the group, clearly bothered by the turn the *budr* had taken. Noticing that they may have overstepped the bounds with their incessant harangue of 'insults' Michael and Shamel eased off but without out rightly apologizing. The rest of the evening was spent on the same spot on the sidewalk as the 'girls' joked, cackled and swished around until the early hours of the morning.

What I hoped to demonstrate through in this section is how *budr* and the highly stylized forms of effeminate comportment that it accompanied were part of in-group performance modalities. It is important to note that in both sets of interactions recounted here the exchanges were meant to thrill and amuse other men who were not directly involved in them. Furthermore, and as argued earlier, as Ali referenced Gigi's indiscriminant sexual behavior and as Shamel and Michael play-teased Juhara for 'her loose ways' they did not mean to actually put them down for their behavior but they meant to reference dominant understandings of appropriate feminine sexuality. Camp, in those instances, not only allowed for scene-specific forms of group performance but also provided a commentary on the structures of heteronormative sexuality that so often oppressed and alienated gay men.

There is an abundance of ethnographic material relating to gender in Egypt and, more specifically, material that deals directly with women's sexuality and gender roles (Early 1985, Early 1993, El-Kholy 2002, Fernea 2002, Mahmood 2001, Mahmood 2005). The ethnographic repertoire on women highlights the centrality of sexual and procreative maturity to the definition of gender sociality. Furthermore, this procreative maturity is deeply entwined with ideas regarding women's sexualities and ones regarding how such sexualities should be monitored and controlled. Through her work with women in a low-income neighborhood in Cairo El-Kholy presents how bodily changes associated with puberty and menstruation force girls to "...become much more aware of their own bodies as well as of their gendered attributes, expectations and responsibilities" (El-Kholy 2002: 85). Menstruation signals a girl's transition

from that of a female child to that of a sexually reproductive woman; in a sense, a girl's ability to reproduce is also a signal of her newfound sexuality and such a transformation is manifested in a change in behavioral norms and dispositions. After menstruation girls cannot be allowed the same level of freedom that they had been accustomed to and an emphasis on chastity and modesty informs their further development as social subjects. In contrast, young men's movements and sociality are not heavily controlled nor critically monitored. This aspect of gender ideals is highly infused with strong ideas regarding morality, (Early 1993, El-Kholy 2002, Mahmood 2005, Fernea 2002, Ghannam 2002, Yount and Carrera 2006 ). The concern with the control of post-pubescent girls' movements and sociality (Assaad 1980, Early 1993, El Kholy 2002, Mahmood 2005) reflects the prevalent understanding that, in a way, once girls begin menstruating they acquire the responsibility of maintaining social morality. Women's sexuality is perceived as a threat to the moral order and, as such, emphasis on chastity and modesty must permeate the identities of young women. Furthermore, many Egyptian girls are forced to undergo female circumcision procedures just before puberty (Assaad 1980)<sup>84</sup>. One of the most popular reasons given for subjecting girls to such procedures<sup>85</sup> is their importance in controlling women's sexual drives and, in doing so, Egyptian traditions and morality as a whole<sup>86</sup> (Assaad 1980, El-Kholy 2002).

When my informants employed tactics of camp performance they referenced and played with those gendered ideals. Such plays with and in performance are both critical and subversive in multiple ways; the fact that men were employing performance styles commonly associated with women is one obvious form of subversion. However, the subversive quality of my informants' interactions is multilayered; men often played with ideas of sexual excess, for example, as when they made fun of and play-admonished Gigi for 'her loose

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<sup>84</sup> The prevalence of female genital cutting is a thorny issue that cannot be gauged easily through research because of the intimate nature of such matters, however, there is ample evidence that such operations continue to take place in Egypt in both urban and rural settings (Assad 1980, Yount and Carrera 2006, Gordon 1991).

<sup>85</sup> Female circumcision operations are widely supported by women who have themselves had to undergo the procedure (Assaad 1980, Yount and Carrera 2006, El-Kholy 2002).

<sup>86</sup> El-Kholy describes how Om Yehia, one of her informants, "...felt very strongly about the importance of the operation. It makes a woman *hadya*, sexually calm, but, she emphasized, not frigid, *barda*, towards her husband" (El-Kholy 2002).

ways' or when Shamel exclaimed that they were standing with 'a whore' in reference to Juhara. What is essential about those comments is their ironic nature; all of my informants fell outside the bounds of appropriate sexuality and their theatrical exclamations of incredulity were, even as they employed the language of indignant approbation, meant to ridicule the social outrage directed at, not only their sexual behavior as homosexuals, but what they imagined to be similar expressions of outrage at women's unbridled sexuality.

One way in which to highlight how the forms of camp parody challenged dominant gendered norms is to juxtapose it against other forms of humor that addressed similar issues of gender. During the period of my fieldwork Birell, a brand of non-alcoholic beer, launched a massive advertising campaign sporting the tagline 'man-up and drink Birell'. The campaign featured several ads where men whose masculinity was placed in question were finally ordered by the ad to 'man-up and drink Birell'. During a group gathering where men had watched a random selection of funny clips on YouTube, one of them brought up the ad and asked if anyone had seen it. Despite the fact that several men had in fact seen the advert they played it anyway. The ad opened with a close-up of a sign reading the 'Birell Man Rehabilitation Center' and as it moved to a shot of the support group taking place inside we saw a man complaining that his biggest gender-related problem was that he could not get into football. As he complained, he crossed his legs very tightly in an effeminate manner and the person in charge of running the group briefly glanced at his crossed legs before dutifully telling him that his dislike for football was the least of his problems. He then went on to tell him that, as men, they could never sit that way and that he had an easy saying for remembering the proper way to sit for man. The rest of the group then erupted in unison as they said "hott el ankle 'ala el rokba, teb'aa 'argal min Drogba!" (place your ankle on your knee and you'll be manlier than Drogba<sup>87</sup>). The ad then fades away to the slogan 'man-up and drink Birell'. Despite the fact that ad was meant as part of a wider, humorous campaign, as I looked around I could tell that none of the men were in the least bit amused by it. Malek had a particularly sour look

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<sup>87</sup> A famous Ivorian football player.

of disapproval on his face and as he said that he found the ad offensive all of the other men agreed.

While this was perhaps a very minor incident it really highlights the importance of irony to the forms of camp operating on the scene. When men played around with effeminate behavior in their camp performances they meant to draw attention to the incredulity of normative gendered behavior but this ad did not seem to employ the same playful attitude towards those norms, in fact it seemed to reinforce those very norms men hoped to challenge.

### **Camp as Citation and Commentary**

As alluded to earlier, relating to one another through camp also allows men to relate to wider structures of gendered heteronormativity through parody; through mimicry and the parodic depiction of those ideals men render such structures playfully frivolous. I would certainly agree with Harvey's assertions regarding a camp style's citational nature; it is precisely through citation of gendered ideals, the medium of interactive performativity and, in my informants' case, classed ideals that camp flourishes. If we then return to the issue of 'gay slang' and the narratives surrounding its origins then the use of slang itself is a citational move used to link and reflect back upon the processes of signification associated with Mohamed Ali Street, its dancers and their counter-normative moralities. Harvey proposes that one of the ways in which camp operates as a citational device is through its citation "...of cultural artefacts..." such as "...texts (novels, plays), films and music (usually lyric theatre)..." where such citation is "...realized either through direct or adapted quotes, or through reference and allusion" (Harvey 2002: 1150). In this formulation I would argue that the entire Mohamed Ali Street imaginarium operates as such a cultural artifact; the collection of snippets and imagined pieces of this world mediated through texts, film, music and theatre weave themselves together into an idealized whole with the prototypical strong, working-class female at its epicenter and the use of slang and its attending narratives is a citation of this highly evocative world in its, at times, messy entirety. Furthermore, such a general use of citationality fits in with the scene's use of camp in interactions such as the ones described earlier.



If we return to Ali's post from the previous chapter and analyze it in greater detail in terms of style we find that it displays the various forms of citationality that Harvey argues are hallmarks of a camp logic, namely that "... of the medium..." and "...of femininity" in addition to that of cultural aretefacts (Harvey 2002: 1150). Ali writes;

A dear girlfriend is the one who inspired me to write this lovely blog post and the idea behind the title is to poke fun at a religious television program that was called "Before You Get Judged". There was a bitch of a presenter who would point at the minaret of a mosque and say "Before you get judged!" Of course this was during the period of veiling and hype over religiosity in a bygone era...What's important here is that some girls will definitely ask what *tata 'brazo* means and my answer would be: *tata 'abrazo* is a verb derived from *obreyza*, meaning the police *box*<sup>1</sup> heaven forbid, like when *you* and your girlfriends are standing on a street corner in *Eljar*...and the *box* comes by to pick you up this, no offence, is called an *obreyza*.

It doesn't surprise me that there are girls who aren't fluent in *enti language*...Like a short while ago when we were sitting with a nice girl who had read the entry about the disappearance of men from the city (as Gigi would say 'this bitch of a city where one can't find a single man!') and asked me what *kawaneen* meant? Of course I know there's an age difference and a difference in exposure...that puts girls at different levels of command of *enti language*...but my answer is, *kawaneen* originally means, no offence, 'ovens', 'flaming girls' or girls on fire. And of course it's understandable that girls would be seething from the sexual frustration and deprivation they're subjected to.

Without further ado and without unnecessary drawing out of matters like they do on the television show *Glee*...when my dear friend

inspired this post's title she drew my attention to something very important (of course aside from the fact that that bitch of a presenter took off her veil and started presenting another show about interior decorating and celebrity homes) that there really is a massive generational gap and, consequently, a lot of references are simply lost. And I'm really shocked, annoyed and infuriated by the new generation. All of them are progressive girls, very open minded, you'll find that every one of those girls has had sexual experiences at the age of 17 as if it's all normal, problem-free and very cool! And I say to myself 'my God we really haven't been girls properly!'

So even as my dear girlfriend *budaret* that bitch of a presenter from Before You Get Judged and I thought it was very funny and we sat *nebaneg* until we were blind from laughter I felt that when I wrote about that *budrah* not all readers would get it. I felt that it was age-specific and specific to a particular socialisation experience. Meaning that, unless you came onto the scene at a certain point of time and at a particular point in time the *kawaneen* from the pre-internet era *budarooki* and you were treated in a certain way and subjected to certain parameters for social interaction (granted they are shitty parameters but nevermind), you won't get a lot of things (It's like *budr* and *enti language* are dying arts—sigh).

For example, the fear of the *obreyza* was a real fear ailing the lives of all *kawaneen* especially the ones who lived through the period of the painful Queen Boat incident. There really was a period when all the girls were terrified that they would *yata'abrazo*. The *obreyza* was like the bogeyman or the wicked witch, a girl's career was over if she was *tata'abrazet!* But look at the girls of today: letting their hair down and totally out there! And now we're the older generation living with irrational fears of the *obreyza*.

Exactly like the term *budrah*: *budr* is the language when things drop and splatter and means when your girlfriend, who knows all your

secrets, comes and tells everyone you're not a top or anything that you are a massive bottom, this is called a *budrah*.

This also falls under what can be called 'the dark arts' (because it really is dark and evil) and every girl in the world is at risk of *budr* at any moment! Actually there was a prayer that all the girls said at some point: and it is—"may He guard you, not let you get *budr*"

Grammatically speaking, the post is addressed to the feminine singular and the use of *enti* language is consistent throughout the entire post rendering writer, reader and almost all other subjects or persons brought up feminine. The reality is, as a stand alone blog post on the Internet (and assuming some readers who happen to stumble upon the post may not read necessarily read the blog header or the blogger's profile) readers may in fact not realize that Ali was a gay-identified man. The campiness of the post, colorful, playful and evocative as it may be would be entirely lost on readers unacquainted with Ali or his sexuality. Camp is, like gay language in general, above all a question of relational interpretation, it accrues depth, value and meaning through its mutual negotiation in a sphere of general opposition to the normative. This is precisely why the notion of citationality is incredibly important; camp is almost always citational because it is almost always a comment on the status quo but is understood as such by those keenly aware of its echoic nature.

Furthermore, I would argue that camp, especially as it is understood among my informants, almost always involves an understanding that there are always multiple layers of text and meanings at play in citational practices. So while Ali references the scene, the show 'Before You Get Judged', religion and so forth, he understands that various readers will only be able to capture the essence of particular references in different and at times partial ways. At times this partial ability to capture a reference's meaning is a result of differential knowledge of the artefacts or first-hand experiences being cited but the irony running through the entire post is one feature that can be grasped and understood by most queer readings of the post.

The queer reading of Ali's text foregrounds men's existence on the periphery; this is particularly pertinent when considered in relation to religion or, at the very least, the public forms of Islamic religiosity prevalent in Egypt. While, as stated in the introduction, men often shied away from seriously discussing matters of religion they had no problem, as is the case with Ali's post in referencing religion in a camp manner. When approached from a camp perspective men did not mean to critique the central tenants of the faith but to critique the social manifestations of the perceived, increased level of religiosity in the public sphere. As discussed in the introduction, the "period of veiling and hype over religiosity" Ali was referring to is one of those manifestations. Men felt that, with the increasing sense of religiosity and the emergence of more stringent views on morality and sexuality, there would be even less space for alternative sexualities.

In order to engage with this rhetoric of religious alienation men often employed tactics of irreverence similar to the ones they used in relation to gendered norms. For example, on the first day of Ramadan, when Gigi spoke to me about making plans for the evening he addressed me in the feminine as he joked 'lets go watch the men pray at night'. Later on in the evening, as Gigi joked about how we would have to shift around what we did at night during Ramadan he said that when he had spoken to Haitham earlier in the day he had picked up the phone and, without taking a pause, had asked '*enti lessa mat7ara2teesh?!*' ('have you not burst into flames yet?!'). Even later that same night, as we sat a coffee shop in Zamalek with Haitham, Gigi started saying that he had been thinking of doing something to celebrate Ramadan as a 'community'. He paused momentarily before saying '*maybe a khatma*' (where a group would get together and divide up the recitation of the entire Quran). After yet another brief pause Gigi laughed then added 'so we could all burst into flames together!'. He then looked in Haitham's direction and, using a diminutive of his scene nickname Fawahesh (debaucherous sins) and addressing him in the feminine, said "*enti ya Fohsh hatwala 'i awel matarabi min el moshaf*" (you Fohsh, you're going to burst into flames as soon as you come near the Quran). During those exchanges, the men were indulging in society's own disparaging view of them but rather than internalizing the negativity associated with such a view they placed up for ridicule

in a similar way as they did with gendered norms. When Gigi and Haitham made references to bursting into flames they were referencing an oft-repeated saying that devils/demons burst into flames and burned whenever the Quran was recited. So while society labeled gay men as irreligious, immoral sexual deviants they took such a judgment to its extreme form (by taking on the role of devils) in order to parody it and the judgmental attitude to which it was anchored. While it is certainly true that this was by no means an intervention into actual debates regarding the religious permissibility of homosexuality, by ‘camping’ their reactions to societal, religious attitudes towards homosexuality they were placing the debate itself (a debate which seemed to always place them at a disadvantage and to cast them as evildoers) into question.

Men played with the juxtaposition between their standing within normative religious discourse and their sexualities. For example, during one late-night gathering at Haitham’s partner’s house on the outskirts of the city, a reference to religion made an unusual appearance in a discussion of sex. Karram, Malek’s cousin, had started speaking to the group about a sexual problem he had been having at the time. He laughed as he told the group that several men had lost their erections while in bed with him. Men started offering random pieces of advice on how to fix the problem, some spoke of the importance of foreplay while Haitham suggested that Karram buy a ‘cock ring’ which he knew from experience helped maintain erections. Malek then lifted up his legs and, pointing towards his crotch said that Karram should externally massage the men’s prostate. As the men laughed, one of them, in reference to the best position to access the prostate told Karram, addressing him in the feminine, “*enti bas salli wesgodi wekhaleeki sagda*” (you should just pray and prostrate and then remain prostrated). In between laughs, several other men said in near unison “*khodi wade‘ elsagda*” (take the position of prostration). By inserting religious references in a context where such insertion would generally be considered not only inappropriate but downright blasphemous by some, men parodied their relation to popular Islamic discourse.

As would be expected playing around with camp and religious matters was a tricky endeavor and one that was perhaps much more questionable in the eyes of

my religiously practicing informants than a play with gender. Haitham was by far one of the most vocal men on the scene about his agnosticism and his aversion to any form of organized religion and so, rather predictably, he stirred some trouble on more than one occasion by taking jokes relating to religion a little too far for others' liking. For example, in a bid to bolster his popularity on the scene Haitham decided to host an outrageous fetish party at his boyfriend's home. In the weeks leading up to the party there was a lot of talk about what each person would be wearing and what arrangements could be made for those who could not venture out in public in their intended costumes. A few days before the party I asked Ali if he would be going and he responded with a vehement no. He explained that he had heard about Haitham's own costume plans and found them crude and offensive. He went on to say that Haitham had planned to dress in two white pieces of cloth, the proscribed form of dress for men participating in the annual hajj. Ali explained that he was always one for challenging dominant modes of oppression but that Haitham's choice, in his race for salacious controversy, had entirely missed the deep symbolic meaning of those two pieces of cloth and of the annual hajj. He then went on to explain that the hajj was supposed to be a symbolic enactment of the day of judgment, the day when people, stripped of their worldly possessions would appear before God with nothing but their deeds and their hearts. The two pieces of white cloth that Haitham seemed so willing to trivialize in a fetishistic manner were in fact supposed to be burial shrouds; this proscription for dress is meant as a reminder to Muslims that the world is transient, that death is a reality and that they would one day have to appear before God, equal in everything but their deeds. Ali added that to joke about society's admonishment of homosexuality and even to seriously critique organized religion was one thing but to trivialize such somber tenants of the faith was to go too far, even by the scene's standards.

This incident involving Haitham and Ali highlights how tricky the question of camp and parody could be particularly when considered in relation to religion but even this incident was an opportunity for men on the scene to question and negotiate the extent to which they could be used. By refusing to attend the party Ali was in a sense drawing a boundary to what could be considered scene-camp practice.

## Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to present and examine patterns and aspects of in-group performance and comportment on the scene and to argue that they employ a subversive camp aesthetic that at once allows them to foment a sense of group identity whilst at the same time to challenge dominant structures of norms that continually place them at a disadvantage. Following the introduction of gay slang and *enti* language in relation to scene narratives in the previous chapter I wanted to examine and highlight the pertinence of performance and in-group stylization of praxis to the experiences of gay men on the scene in the present. Whereas the previous chapter has argued that narratives allow men to draw on an imagined past and historicity in order to create a sense of collective continuity for the scene, this chapter has attempted to focus on the on-going processes of group interaction to similar experiences of groupness.

This sense of groupness is not only enshrined and enriched because of the interactive nature of the performances described in the chapter but they are also based on a shared sense of marginality. The product of the plays with gender-inversion, parody and irony is an elusive yet captivating one for my informants but it is such an elusive character that enriches its camp aesthetic, an aesthetic that at times trivializes the serious in order to break down and deconstruct it. Most of my informants expressed an intense discomfort with *enti* language when they first encountered and an even greater level of discomfort with the effeminate performances with which it was associated but for the majority of informants through increased immersion in the scene they learned not only to utilize such language and performances but to gain appreciation of and enjoyment from it.

## CONCLUSION

### “A Kinship for Gay Men”

And here comes the first thread, the thread of acknowledgment and recognition. Aside from the philosophical, sociological, anthropological considerations of what is kinship and what does it entail and how can we define it and how is it formed and how is it sustained, and whether or not the gay community in Egypt proposed a model that can fit within any of those definitions, for the sheer fact of practical considerations, there is a certain form of kinship for gay men in Egypt.  
–Ali

(excerpt from a post titled “27ky ya Shahrazade – Long long time ago (1)” from Ali’s blog *Awkward Sex in the City*)

‘And they say there aren’t any gay Arabs!’ It seems fitting to return to Malek’s exclamation with which I began the thesis as I now turn to the conclusion. Malek’s comment was a reference to Massad’s arguments regarding same-sex sexualities in the Arab world. This thesis has sought to engage with Massad’s work, highlighting the importance of maintaining a critical stance towards the use of sexual identity categories and the discursive structures to which they belong and through which they are propagated whilst charting the various ways such categories are experienced. It argues that Cairo’s burgeoning gay scenes need to be studied and that Cairene gay men’s struggles and anxieties, the ways in which they negotiate between their sexual subjectivities and other subject positions and their attempts at building a scene shed light on shifting understandings of sexuality in the Arab World, on the ways in which global discourses surrounding sexuality are both appropriated and transformed. While my informants used the term ‘gay’ to denote something almost identical to the basic definition of the term in the Euro American context (exclusive attraction to and desire for members of the same sex) what this label meant for their life choices and how it was transformed in their attempts to reconcile various aspects of their subjectivities was quite different. This thesis seeks to avoid continually re-inscribing an East/West binary into our approach to the study of sexuality by attending to the uniquely local dimensions of sexual identity categories while acknowledging the importance of dynamic, global informational flows to said



dimensions. My informants regularly made references to gay rights movements in the US and Europe so Massad is right to address the influence exerted by discourses surrounding such movements on the creation and development of particular subjectivities but, as explicated in the introduction, such critiques must be accompanied by an equally attentive examination of empirical realities and their complex nature. This thesis aims to contribute to the study of sexuality through a detailed ethnographic account of contemporary, marginalized sexualities in Egypt, an as yet understudied area of research.

The fact that Ali chose to use a language of kinship over one of political mobilization is telling; the scene described and investigated in this this thesis was above all a flexible, fluid and ever shifting network of social relations but therein lay one of the primary reasons for its perceived instability. Therein, in part, lay the root of the sense of ephemerality and transience that pervaded the scene. It was a shifting and at times fleeting form of kinship but it was, nevertheless, a form of kinship that facilitated the continual maintenance of those ‘scenes’ as sociocultural entities. The scene offers a non-normative sociality that allows men’s sexual subjectivities to flourish through a different form of intersubjective relatedness. As chapter two has demonstrated, one of the crises that men face due to their sexualities is one of relatedness; the centrality of the familial connectivity in Egypt and the various ways in which men’s placement within traditional kinship networks greatly informs their subjectivities means that their sexualities threaten and obscure what sorts of futures they could imagine for themselves. Even the very act of ‘coming out’ is problematic and ends with many men finding themselves in a grey hovering between disclosure and non-disclosure. The ambiguities, uncertainties and anxieties associated with questions relating to the family are only one set of such potentially destabilizing that the men and the scene as a whole have to contend with.

The Queen Boat raid and the media circus surrounding the arrest, detainment and prosecution of men was spoken of as a ‘wake-up call’, a reminder to men and the scene at large of their precarity, it was a reminder that they were still, in many ways, at the mercy of the authorities. The chapters have argued that the 2001-2004 crackdown dealt a severe blow to the scene’s

constitution in various ways; in the first instance, it quickly dismantled and destroyed the social fabric of the scene, its ‘gay ties of kinship’. As men cut social ties with many of their friends from the scene, as some went into complete hiding and others yet fled to other lands, the scene (in this case more specifically the upper and upper-middle class scene) seemed to completely disintegrate. In the second instance, it threw a wrench into what had up until then been felt as a progressive development of a scene leading men to speak of the incident and the period following it as a rupture, a break in the conceptual historicity of the scene and community. The dark shadow of insecurity that was cast over the scene as a result of the crackdown could still be felt when I conducted fieldwork even as younger men, new entrants to the scene continued to ‘populate’ it, transforming it into another, socially mutated version of its former self. Men are still battling to reposition themselves in relation to the state, to understand the tactics and maneuverings involved in the processes of their criminalization and how to avoid a repeat of that period. But even as the scene began to develop anew it was threatened by internal fissures and divides (primarily along class lines). Divides that problematize and obfuscate notions of ‘community’ and aspirations for political mobilization. As Ali writes in yet another post on his blog “The way a gay community is organized might be according to a particular social paradigm (classist, ethnic, religious,...etc). Our community is no exception. It is strictly divided according to class and social status”. Men often spoke of the need for social justice, a rebalancing of the Egyptian class system but, as they built scene relations, as Ali’s post asserts, they tended to reproduce wider societal divisions. This was particularly evident in the ways in which access to private scene spaces among men from upper and upper-middle class scenes was both guarded and insular. Such insular practices highlighted how, despite attempting to build an alternative social space, men were still deeply embedded within wider structures of social and economic inequality and as they struggled to draw the boundaries to their scene they were still trying to re-position themselves vis-à-vis their existing class-based networks of social relations.

Despite these fissures, divisions and fractures as well as the forces threatening to destabilize the scene and its development the thesis has argued that such forces had to contend with men’s determination to cultivate and build a

scene. The latter three chapters of the thesis have focused on such concerted efforts. Places where scene interactions unfolded were not only receptacles for such interactions, they were the product of said interactions. They were created, shaped and transfigured through men's movements through them. However, the place-making processes at work on the scene still exhibited and demonstrated the struggles between forces of permanence and ephemerality affecting the scene more generally. There was a paradoxical element to such efforts. As stated earlier, men strived to avoid a repeat of the events of the Queen Boat but in order to do so they had to create places but remain discreet, below the radar of the authorities. That said, however, those places featured in scene narratives and such narratives could not be attacked or raided. Such narratives were the sole 'property' of the scene. And this is perhaps why even the Queen Boat raid and the 2001-2004 crackdown could be integrated into processes of scene-building through narratives. As argued in chapter five, the sense of rupture and discontinuity associated with the period of 2001-2004 was incorporated into such a process through narratives. As men spoke of the damage arrests and prosecutions had wrought on the scene in a pre/post-Queen Boat fashion they were weaving continuities and a sense of historicity through those experiences of rupture and discontinuity. Narratives may in fact be the scene's most powerful weapon against the threat of impermanence since no collectivity can be imagined without a narrative. Furthermore, the narrative surrounding the Queen Boat traversed and cut across scene/class lines even as boundaries through social ties remained strong and continued to be erected. While the narratives used by men from different scenes related mostly to their respective scenes, the event itself acted as reference point on both scenes.

Narratives were not the only unifying force among my informants however, as argued in chapter six, the scene's day-to-day activities unfolded through interactions that were heavily accented by a scene-specific form of camp aesthetics. Using slang, gender-subversion, irony, humor and so forth men were able to capitalize on modes of interaction specific to the scene to underscore their collective experience, to foreground, cultivate and cement a sense of groupness. Despite slight differences in use of slang and performance the general camp aspect of those performances cut across class differences and, as with narratives,

were a feature of wider sense of the term ‘scene’ (perhaps more approximate to ‘community’) encompassing the other scenes within it.

Throughout the thesis I have argued that Cairo’s gay scenes were struggling with forces that threatened their stability and their perceived permanence but that, nevertheless, there were creative attempts and efforts by men to continually ‘make’ those scenes, to continually invest them with meaning and significance. So even as inner fragmentation along class lines, state criminalization and men’s own insecurities and fears regarding their place within familial networks of relationships threatened to tear them apart, those scenes persisted in one form or another. Men carved out places and spaces for their interactions, they cultivated scene specific histories and modes of sociality to underscore the vitality and importance of this ‘alternative kinship for gay men’.

### **Sexuality, Subjectivity and Collectivity**

In a 1981 interview with *Gai Pied* Foucault stated that he mistrusted “...the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is the secret of my desire?’ Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, ‘What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?’ The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one’s sex, but rather, to use one’s sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships” (Foucault 1994: 135). Foucault’s distrust of psychoanalysis’ use of questions of desire to answer questions of subjectivity fuels his questioning and problematization of modern conceptualizations of sexuality. Massad’s arguments against the potentially ossifying effect and influence of a ‘Gay International’ discourse that attempts to create ‘gay subjects’ in its own image similarly questions the given nature of such discourse. However, by addressing the adoption of such categories among particular groups of Arab men without attending to the complexities inherent in such processes of cross-cultural influence and transformation Massad threatens to obscure the complexity of such transformations as non-Western men struggle with making those categories their own. The thesis argues that the question should not be whether such discourses are successful in creating particular types of subjects or not but how, given the

ubiquity of certain types of discourses surrounding sexuality, local and context-specific transformations in the experience of sexual and non-sexual subjectivity take place. It does not take homosexuality to be an answer but, as Foucault urges us, interrogates how, as a form of sexual subjectivity, homosexuality in this specific Cairene case influences a multiplicity of relationships and breeds a host of shifting performative styles. I have hoped avoid an oversimplification of questions of sexual identification by looking at the various ways in which sexual identity categories intersect and interact with other subject positions and the ways in which experiences relating to homosexuality among gay Cairenes come to take a class-inflected shape. In the process, the forgoing discussions have contributed ethnographic insights towards our understanding of the Egyptian upper and upper-middle classes.

Questions of selving and subjectivity have greatly shaped and animated the discussions in the forgoing chapters. The approach to subjectivity central to my arguments follows on from feminist and postmodern critiques of earlier conceptions of the self which tended to obfuscate the role played by interpersonal relationships in the constitution of subjectivity and to downplay its fractious nature. By focusing on multiple, conflicting and at times warring subject positions and the intersubjective nature of selfhood the thesis hopes to, not only explain the struggles faced by my informants, but to problematize the position of sexual identity categories entangled in processes of selving as well. As the ethnographic discussions in chapter two have highlighted one of the key differences between the Egyptian context and Euro American contexts (which are often used as a reference point in the discourses of gay rights organizations and the media more generally) is the importance played by familial connectivity in processes of selving. The chapter demonstrated that even amongst the most Westernized of my informants such connectivity meant that men did not engage with sexual identification in the same way as their Euro American ‘counterparts’ even in cases where a ‘gay’ identity category was ‘adopted’. The chapter (and discussions in the thesis more generally) attempts to avoid an East/West binary by acknowledging the role played by Western identity category and identity politics discourses surrounding sexuality (more specifically the notion of ‘coming out’ and the efficacy of such disclosures in processes of recognition)

whilst explaining how ‘coming out’ was problematized by my informants. Such an approach highlights how the self is constructed and experienced at the nexus of various discursive currents and flows. The discussions surrounding disclosure hoped to deepen our approaches to subjectivity by focusing on the future-directed and processual nature of intersubjective experience as well as ‘present-tense’ experiences of subjectivity. Anxieties about disclosure were bound up with and connected to anxieties about the future, about the sorts of subjects moments of disclosure were creating and the potential breaks and tears that such disclosures were bringing about both in oneself and others. By addressing ‘coming out’ as a series of ‘moments of disclosure’ rather than a single act of outing the thesis has underscored the on-going character of selving and intersubjectivity.

The thesis adds to the literature on intersectional subjectivity through its focus on the intersection of classed and sexual subjectivities. Intersectional approaches do not posit unified or holistic notions of selfhood or the self but instead attempt to account for the various ways in which inclusion in particular social groupings or identity formations inform selving processes. The discussions of class marry a structural approach, that charts the effects of Egyptian social stratification on divisions and fissures to be found in the organization of scenes, with one that addresses the performative character of class position, one that is able to attend to the embodied character of subjectivity and to look at how class position in a system of stratification was both a discursive construct (mediated through evaluations of social and cultural as well as economic capital) as well as embodied performance. The discussions in the thesis have hoped to complicate our understandings of the dynamics of sexual and class identification by looking at the intersection of a marginalized position (a marginalized sexuality) with a privileged one (in terms of class position in the case of my upper-middle and upper class informants) and the ways in which such an intersection affects the social organization of Cairo’s gay scenes and the performative inter and intra-class interactions.

One of the central aims of the thesis is to problematize sexual identity categories without doing away with them entirely or without discounting their relevance and importance to those who ‘adopt’, engage with and enact them. I

take the gay scene and the support and forms of connectivity and relatedness that it affords men to be central to such an approach to sexual identity categories. Interrogating the production and maintenance of a collective identity or forms of 'groupness' does not take sexual identification to be an automatic avenue for inclusion into a social group but problematizes how social groups (such as sexual communities) come into being. By looking at place-making efforts, the role played by narratives in constructing shared histories as well as the role played by co-discursive linguistic and performance practices among gay Cairenes the thesis underscores how social groups and group-specific sexual subjectivities are constructed through discourse and are enacted and continually reproduced through performance. One of the ways in which this contributes more specifically to the burgeoning field of gay or queer language studies in an original way is through its focus on narratives surrounding the origins and production of such linguistic caches. This thesis hopes to be a starting point for further examinations of contemporary marginalized sexualities in Egypt and an addition to the relatively limited literature on similar sexualities in the Middle East more generally.

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I left Cairo shortly after the historic protests that toppled Mubarak's thirty year dictatorial regime. When Omar Suleiman issued the official statement announcing Mubarak's resignation I was out in Tahrir Square with several of my informants and countless thousands of other Egyptians. We did not hear the actual statement at the time. As news of the announcement had rolled and rippled through the square in a swell of cheers and swaying flashes of red, white and black we knew that the eighteen day standoff had ended. At the time I left fieldwork the sense of elation and exhilaration could still be felt in the air. And the situation was no different among my informants. They were thrilled and excited by what the future had to hold. The events of the last three years have, since then, done much to dampen their outlook and dishearten the most optimistic of Egyptians.

The scenes themselves have undergone changes over the last few years. Many of my informants (particularly from upper-middle class and middle class backgrounds) have left Egypt in search of job opportunities elsewhere as the economy slowed down, many to the Arabian Gulf (to Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia) while others are still looking for opportunities abroad to emigrate. Military curfews have altered the spaces and places for cruising and hangouts, particularly during the period following the events of August 2013. Despite those changes and shifts, ones that seemed to be eating away at the scene I had become so heavily involved in, through conversations with informants still in Cairo I learned that during the period when the military curfew was lifted there were large parties held at a famous downtown venue the likes of which the scene had never seen before. Of particular significance was the unprecedented level of class-mixing at those parties. Sadly I was not able to attend any of those large gatherings but the accounts of the format they have taken seem to signal an entirely different scene social environment than that described in this thesis.

Even as my many of the men I met through fieldwork leave or make plans to leave Egypt, the scenes persist in one form or another. Maybe one day the stories of those leaving now will be transformed into yet another narrative of the scene's perceived ephemerality, its precarious, shifting existence but would be positioned within a wider national narrative about the unfolding and evolving revolution. But even as the scenes are transformed and altered, with some fearing their loss and the effects of unforeseen events, they persist in one form or another.



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