How Do You Say "Come Out of the Closet" in Arabic? Queer Activism and the Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine

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Jason Ritchie

One night during my fieldwork in Israel-Palestine, I went with a Palestinian friend to a gay party at one of Tel Aviv's popular clubs. Before leaving for the club, my friend, a "permanent resident" of Jerusalem who sometimes identifies as gay, asked to borrow a tank top and some gel for his hair. After his transformation, I jokingly remarked that he looked "very gay." "Good," he said, "maybe they'll let me in."

In the end, they did not let him in. Maybe it was because I forgot, as we approached the door, to avoid speaking Arabic. Maybe it was because his ID betrayed his Arabness, despite his effort to offset it with a display of gayness. Maybe it was, contrary to both our suspicions, for some other reason entirely. Whatever the case, that moment cast into sharp relief the discursive framework that governs sexuality and race in Israel-Palestine: the entrance to the bar was a sort of checkpoint, like so many others queer Palestinians regularly face, in bars, saunas, parks, Web sites, and other "egalitarian" gay spaces; it was manned by a queer agent of Israeli nationalism, whose job it was to determine who belongs in this gay/Israeli space and who does not.

I read the checkpoint, then, not just as a literal site on the border where agents of the state "inspect . . . what goes in and out" of the nation but as a ubiquitous subjective process wherein citizens and noncitizens alike check themselves—and others—against "the field of signs and practices" in which the nation-state is represented.[1] By drawing attention to, rather than eschewing, the exclusionary practices of the state and the racist discourses of the nation, the metaphor of

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the checkpoint more effectively captures the experiences of queer Palestinians than the more familiar metaphor of the closet. Moreover, because it so crudely inscribes the violence of the state on the bodies of its national-racial others, any critique of the checkpoint necessarily entails a critique of the state and its violence. The closet, on the other hand, is a subtler, "characteristically 'postmodern' [technique] of power," and the struggle against it — and for the right to "come out" as respectable queer citizens — insulates the state from critique by representing it as a "neutral [arbiter] of injury," to be appealed to for redress and protection, "rather than . . . [itself] invested with the power to injure."[2]

Drawing on ethnographic interviews with activists who have played particularly important roles in shaping the contours of queer Israeli and queer Palestinian activism, I argue that mainstream Israeli gay activism's reliance on the politics of visibility and recognition is embedded in — and supportive of — an increasingly significant strain of Israeli nationalism that incorporates and normalizes Jewish "minorities," even as it maintains the political, economic, and social subordination of Palestinians.[3] While the dream of "coming out of the closet" into full citizenship and national belonging drives the activism of many queer Israelis, the violence of the checkpoint — and countless other reminders of the impossibility of belonging (not to mention "citizenship") — shapes the strategies of queer Palestinian activists. Rejecting the language and tactics of mainstream (Israeli) gay activism, queer Palestinians articulate a politics of social change that offers a potentially subversive alternative to the normalizing project of queer visibility. Queer Palestinian activism also, in the process, interrogates the assumptions of both the "Western male white-dominated organizations" that advocate on behalf of "victimized" queer Arabs and their harshest critics, who, in their zeal to criticize the chauvinistic tendencies of the "Gay International," uniformly — and chauvinistically — dismiss queer Arab activists as "a minuscule minority" of "Westernized elites" who have blindly adopted the politics and identities of their Western counterparts.[4]

Liberalism, Terrorism, and the Utility of Queers

Two years into the second Intifada, and a year after the onset of the U.S. "War on Terror," the Israeli journalist Yossi Halevi wrote in the *New Republic* what has become for many the authoritative text on queer Palestinians.[5] Cited and recycled in countless magazine and newspaper articles, Web sites, blogs, and even a book-length account of "gay and lesbian life in the Middle East," Halevi's article documents a supposed epidemic of antigay violence in Palestinian society.[6] "Because

the world hasn't forced the P.A. [Palestinian Authority] to tolerate gays, Palestinian homosexuals are increasingly seeking refuge in the only regional territory that does: Israel." "In the last few years," Halevi writes, "hundreds of gay Palestinians . . . have slipped into Israel . . . beyond the reach of their families and the P.A." Halevi speculates that "the liberal world has never taken interest in their plight . . . because that might mean acknowledging the pathology of the nascent Palestinian polity extends well beyond Yasir Arafat and won't be uprooted by one free election." In a textbook case of cultural racism, Halevi understands Palestinian homophobia, whose widespread existence he takes as a given, not in specific historical or sociological terms but as evidence of a timeless pathology. That pathology, in turn, becomes a philosophical justification for the denial of Palestinians' rights to democratic self-representation; after all, according to Halevi, free elections will not make much of a difference.

Halevi's article is important, less because of the nature of his claims or the frequency with which they have been regurgitated than because it articulates in the most poetic, if offensive, terms, the multiple uses of homosexuality—and the complicity of some homosexuals—in the ideological work of the nation-state. Like many other journalists who have taken an interest in the suffering of queer Palestinians, Halevi bases his proclamations on interviews with Shaul Ganon, the head of HaAguda's Palestinian Rescue Project, and a few of the more than three hundred queer Palestinians Ganon claims to have saved.[7] Whatever the accuracy of that number—and whatever the fate of those men, most of whom, Ganon admitted, have been imprisoned or deported—his efforts to expose their plight have yielded a substantial, and at times grotesque, body of stories about queer Palestinian suffering. The sincerity of Ganon's mission to alleviate the suffering of "his children," as he calls them, interests me less than the discursive utility of their suffering, for Ganon and many other Israelis, in the forging of a queer citizen-subject who engages in nationalist politics while carefully avoiding class- or race-based politics that might threaten the overall organization of power in Israel-Palestine.

For liberal Zionists generally, though, representations of Israel as a gay-friendly refuge for victimized queer Palestinians function as a way to evade the fundamental contradiction between racism and liberalism that defines Israeli nationalism.[8] Organized around a language of Jewish blood and common origins, Israel is perpetually caught between an assemblage of racist discourses and practices, which limits membership in the nation and its rights and benefits to Jews, and liberalism, which posits the equality of all the state's citizens, including its Palestinian minority.[9] While the significance of tolerance of homosexuality as a marker of liberal democratic modernity has perhaps declined in recent Israeli

political discourse—alongside the decline of Ashkenazi hegemony and the ascendancy of Mizrahi, religious, and ultranationalist parties—that narrative retains considerable currency in the United States and Europe, where liberal Zionists, especially queer liberal Zionists, frequently deploy it to represent Israel as "an oasis of liberal tolerance in a reactionary religious backwater."[10]

Admittedly, gays and lesbians in Israel have, in recent decades, witnessed a number of advances in "gay rights," significant changes in social attitudes, and the rise of a visible "gay culture." Coinciding with neoliberal reforms and the emergence of identity politics, their successes represent a normalization similar to that in many Western countries of a "privatized, depoliticized" model of homosexuality, that asks of the state only that it recognize the right of queer citizens to "come out of the closet" and into the space of the nation.[11] The queer liberal Israeli citizen-subject does not, however, merely avoid making radical demands of the state: validating the collective nightmares of Israeli national security, which is forever haunted by the bogeyman of the intolerant Palestinian terrorist, properly domesticated gay and lesbian Israelis offer stories of victimized Palestinian queers "seeking refuge" in gay-friendly Israel to rationalize the marginalization of—and justify all manner of state violence against—Palestinians as a result not of the exclusionary logic of Israeli nationalism or the racist practices of the Israeli state but of the "backward" and "inferior" essence of Palestinian culture.[12]

The imposition of such violence against Palestinians—and the offering up of moral justifications for it, itself a form of violence—is a way to constitute the queer Israeli self, its "coming into being as sexual and national subject."[13] There are, of course, many self-consciously anti-Zionist queer Israeli activists, who insist on the inseparability of the queer struggle and the struggle against racism and the occupation, and I do not aim to diminish the importance of their efforts or imply that dissenting voices do not exist.[14] The object of my critique is the more widespread phenomenon whereby mainstream liberal gay and lesbian Israelis—and activists in particular—create, refine, disseminate, and justify racist discourses about Palestinians (or "Arabs") through their stories about and interactions with queer Palestinians. In a depoliticized activism organized around visibility, recognition, and coming out of the closet, queer Israelis draw simultaneously on Western narratives of gayness to "[marginalize] and cast as 'premodern' or 'unliberated'" queer Palestinians, and explain their supposed inability to come into (Western/Israeli) gayness as a result of the irredeemable pathology of Palestinian (or "Arab") culture.[15] Queer Israelis consolidate their membership in the nation as proper, patriotic citizens by reporting for duty as gatekeepers at a metaphorical checkpoint, where queer Palestinians are

inspected, policed, and occasionally admitted into the fold of Israeli gayness as "victims" of Palestinian culture but more often than not denied entry as excessively Arab or insufficiently "gay."

The Culture of the Closet and the Politics of Victimization

As a gay Israeli activist whose work focuses almost exclusively on Palestinians—and by implication, on "political" issues—Ganon is something of an anomaly. He explained that, when he began his work with queer Palestinian refugees, "people actually came to [him] from HaAguda and told [him] to drop it . . . because it makes HaAguda look bad." Without commenting on the merits of Ganon's work, Mike Hamel, the current chair of HaAguda, explained that the organization "[tries] to shy away from . . . Israeli-Palestinian issues . . . because beyond everybody's sense of moral justice, these are really political issues," as opposed to "GLBT issues." Minutes after he asserted the apolitical nature of HaAguda's activism, Hamel offered a lengthy description of his work with Israeli politicians to demand recognition of "gay rights" to representation and legal redress against homophobia. But even if Hamel had described such work as political, there would be no logical contradiction because politics is conceivable and appropriate, in the discourse of liberal Israeli and Western gay activism, only to the extent that it shies away from "transformative" demands in favor of "affirmative remedies for injustice," such as visibility and recognition, that aim to "[correct] inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them."[16] For Hamel and many other mainstream gay activists, transformative demands for restructuring the underlying social framework—in particular, a restructuring of relations between Israelis and Palestinians—fall outside his sense of the gay quest for justice. This mode of depoliticized gay movement continues to be dominated by Israeli Ashkenazi men, and it has been harshly criticized by women, Mizrahim, and other "marginalized Israelis," yet it remains for the most part intact. Indeed the case of Israel is unique insofar as the representations of Palestinians as *the* common enemy of Israeli Jews create a particular incentive and opportunity—even among marginalized queer Israelis—to ensure their proper place in the nation by disassociating themselves from "the conflict" as a "political" issue that has no necessary connection to "gay and lesbian" issues.

Along these lines, Hamel insisted that HaAguda has learned from its history of exclusion and now aims to represent "the Israeli GLBT population at large," including women, Mizrahim, immigrants, religious Jews, and even "gays and lesbians in the settlements in the West Bank." For the latter, it might be considered

"offensive" if the organization takes a stand on "the conflict." When pressed about whether he was concerned that not taking a stand might alienate another part of the "GLBT Israeli population," namely, the queer Palestinian Israeli population, Hamel said, somewhat resignedly, "damned if you do, damned if you don't," leaving unsaid an obvious assumption about who counts as an "Israeli GLBT" matters. That assumption reflects a broader set of discourses in Israeli society, rooted in Zionist thinking, that equate "Israeli" with "Jewish" and continually enforce the invisibility of non-Jewish Israelis — Palestinians and others.

There is, however, one major exception to that rule: the queer Palestinian victim. His visibility is in fact endorsed passionately by Israeli LGBT activists. The ubiquity of the victim motif in Israeli stories about queer Palestinians is perhaps not surprising; the liberal gay politics of visibility and recognition is ultimately about the "[development of] a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured" (queer) victim, who demands the protection of the benevolent state from the "social injury" of homophobia.[17] To be sure, there are modes of radical queer activism that employ strategies of visibility to challenge the narratives of nationalism and the practices of the state. Groups of queer Israeli activists sometimes stage public spectacles — at Tel Aviv's annual gay pride parade and Independence Day celebrations throughout Israel, for example — in which they offer harsh critiques both of the assimilationist politics of mainstream gay activism and of the violent militarism of Israel. However, "the relative weakness with which economic, racial, ethnic, and non-American cultures have been enfolded into queer counterpublicity" in the United States similarly characterizes the "counter-publicity" of queer radicals in Israel. That both "[remain] bound to the genericizing" — and fundamentally exclusionary — "logic of [national] citizenship," moreover, suggests the limited "radical" potential of the tactic of "visibility," one of the key terms in the vocabulary of identity politics.[18] Whatever its potential, in the discourse of hegemonic liberal Israeli and Western queer activisms (as elaborated, for example, in Amalia Ziv's discussion of Black Laundry in this issue), visibility is more commonly understood as the right to "come out of the closet" as a respectable and equal queer citizen, rather than as a strategy for challenging the repressive discourses and practices through which the respectable queer citizen is constructed in the first place.

If Israeli gay activism, in its conceptualization of the state as the compassionate protector of injured queers, supplies the language of victimization, the added ideological utility of the queer Palestinian victim in the discourses of Israeli nationalism makes explicit a narrative that might otherwise remain implicit: queer Palestinians are acceptable, and visible, only insofar as they mute or repudiate

their Palestinianness; the most effective strategy for achieving that goal — and passing through the checkpoint into the space of Israeli gayness — is to confirm the racist narrative of gay-friendly Israel versus homophobic Palestine by becoming the queer Palestinian victim, who flees the repressiveness of "Arab culture" for the oasis of freedom and modernity that is Israel. While Ganon's work with Palestinians is potentially threatening insofar as it violates the Zionist erasure of Palestinians generally, it is conceivable — and tolerable — in the liberal queer Israeli worldview precisely because it confirms (Israeli) perceptions of the collective other by representing the queer Palestinian as a helpless victim of Palestinian homophobia in need of the benevolence and protection of the Israeli state.

Having worked for fifteen years providing social services and seeking political asylum for homeless queer Palestinian prostitutes and drug dealers in Tel Aviv, Ganon has emerged as a sort of local "expert" on queer Palestinians, and in my interview with him, he was at ease making broad, though frequently inaccurate, proclamations about "Arab culture."[19] Although Ganon is forthright about the racism Palestinians face in Israel, the bulk of his knowledge production is devoted to locating the cause of their suffering in a sometimes quaint but generally repressive Arab culture. As most racialist ideologies go, Ganon's analysis of Palestinian homophobia is largely an articulation of the other's lack of what ostensibly constitutes the privileged self. Because the queer Israeli Jewish self is constituted chiefly through the personal/collective journey out of the closet and into visibility, the metaphor of the closet emerges as the sine qua non of the queer Palestinian.

As Hamel explained, queer "emancipation" comes about through "visibility," which is an "extremely important" element in the overall mission of HaAguda, whose "mantra right now [is] that we are an integral part of Israeli society . . . part of this weave that makes Israeli society. . . . [We want] to start seeing more and more public figures . . . being out, showing themselves as a part of whatever life, if it's in the academy, if it's in the military, in any place." Visibility, for Hamel and HaAguda the organization he represents, is both a tactic and a goal, the means and the end of gay activism: "The real [gay] emancipation is to become an everyday part of the whole," to establish queers as normal, productive members of the nation. Sa'ar Netanel, a prominent queer activist, the former owner of Jerusalem's only gay bar, and the first openly gay member of the Jerusalem city council, echoed that sentiment, explaining that while "one of the things that the gay community in Israel is fighting [for] is visibility," queer Palestinians, "even Israeli-Palestinians . . . don't really have visibility. For them it's more difficult to come out."

The question whether queer Palestinians need or want to come out and attain visibility is rarely asked. The possibility that the normalizing project of vis-

ibility, becoming an acceptable part of the "weave that makes Israeli society," is "difficult" for Palestinians because they are forever locked out of that "weave" is even less conceivable. Such an admission would, in fact, turn the liberal gay activist project on its head, for it would expose "the logic of the closet" as a mechanism that not only "allows for [a normalized] homosexuality to be included in the national discourse . . . [and] reproduces and perpetuates oppressive heteronormative practices" but reproduces and perpetuates oppressive racist practices that are equally fundamental to the constitution of the nation.[20] Since, as I have argued, the only acceptable out or visible queer Palestinian is the victim, the only logical explanation for why "there are no [other] 'out' Palestinians," a constant refrain in my interviews with queer Israeli activists and nonactivists alike, is the repressiveness of the racialized collective Palestinian/Arab other.

If one symptom of the pathology that characterizes Palestinian culture—aside from the imagined pogroms against queer Palestinians—is the inability of Palestinian homosexuals to come out of the closet, Ganon articulated a sophisticated analysis of its etiology: a combination of Islamic fundamentalism, which he understands as an essential element of "the Arab culture," and a tribalistic Arab emphasis on the "honor" of the family. According to Ganon, Islam is a profoundly homophobic religion, in which "sex between men is not allowed. The punishment is death. God thinks this way himself." Given this trenchant Islamic homophobia, queer Palestinians, whom Ganon seems to assume are all Muslims, are in an impossible dilemma, because secularism "doesn't exist [in Arab culture]. A Jew or anyone [else], you can ask him . . . if he's religious or doesn't believe in anything . . . [but] there is no such thing in the Arab culture. It's whether you are less religious or more religious."

Arab culture, in this formulation, is a static force that absolutely determines the character of Palestinians and an analytic panacea for understanding why they act the way they do. It is constituted, above all, by religion, and it is the antithesis of secular Western culture. As Netanel put it, for "Palestinians, their Islamic way of looking at homosexuality is different from how Western culture looks at [it]." Islam, however, is not the only culprit in the Arab cultural crime against queer Palestinians. Ganon expressed an admiration for the "rich" Arab culture, which "has wonderful things . . . that our people, we, coming from the West could learn from," such as the code of respect for strangers. But those charming elements of Arab culture are overshadowed by a tribalistic emphasis on the honor of the family, which contrasts markedly with Western culture's respect for the individual and creates an insurmountable barrier to self-realization for queer Palestinians, who cannot come out for fear of shaming the family.

The omnipotence of culture in determining the character of Arabs extends beyond repressive families and communities to queer Palestinians themselves. Ganon explained that even those queer Palestinian victims who flee to Israel and repudiate their Arabness ultimately cannot escape it. While most normal queers reject religion in favor of Western secularism, "you cannot disconnect an Arab guy from his religion." As evidence, Ganon recounted a story about an Israeli Jewish friend who was dating a Palestinian man. When the two were "having sex . . . every time the muezzin" performed the call to prayer, the Palestinian said to his boyfriend, "'Don't touch me now.' And he was unable to explain why. It was, in his words, 'It's bigger than me.'" And in another story, about another Israeli Jewish friend dating a Palestinian, Ganon explained that queer Palestinians are incapable of ridding themselves not only of religious sentiment but of the Arab cultural emphasis on family honor. Ganon's friend and his partner have dated for eighteen years, and the Palestinian partner's family knows about the relationship, but whenever they come to visit, the couple is forced to arrange the apartment as if they are roommates. The family even allows their son to bring his boyfriend to weddings and other events, Ganon remarks, as long as "people don't talk. . . . And he's giving them money, supporting them. . . . It's culture."

Ironically, although Ganon stresses the impossibility for queer Palestinians of transcending the oppressive elements of their culture, he notes a troubling impulse among many to shed its quainter elements: "After finally making it to gay Tel Aviv, they stop speaking Arabic, start dressing differently. . . . They see how other people dress, so they lower their jeans and they buy big belts and some of them [even wear the] Star of David. . . . They try to walk the walk and talk the talk of the Jewish people." Ganon sees his mission, in part, as helping these Palestinians accept their real identity: Jews are Jews, Arabs are Arabs, and eventually, with his help, "they come to understand that . . . they are Arabs. Nothing will change that." In an effort to (re)educate queer Palestinians about their identities, HaAguda even hosts a regular support group in which "we try to teach them back. People like Khalil Jibran, like Emil Habibi. All kinds of texts and songs. Sometimes we show a movie in Arabic. And they connect back. They say, 'Oh yes, I remember . . . my mother used to sing this song.'" Motivated, perhaps, by a need to guard against the destabilizing potential inherent in their encounters with queer Palestinians, Ganon and his colleagues remind queer Palestinians who they really are and where they do—and don't—*belong*.

Queer Activism, Its Critics, and Their Missionary Impulses

Mainstream queer Israeli activist discourse asserts the superiority of Israeli models of homosexuality based chiefly on the coming-out narrative. The presumed absence of openly gay Palestinians — the presumed tyranny of the closet in Palestinian society — is taken as evidence of the inferiority of an essentialized Arab culture, stuck in a distant past. Within this framework, the narrative of the victimized queer Palestinian is a mechanism both for justifying Israeli violence against Palestinians by validating its racist underpinnings and for cementing a depoliticized homosexuality that incorporates (proper) Jewish queers into the nation while holding at bay its non-Jewish (and otherwise improper) others.

Much like the "Gay International" described by Joseph Massad, many queer Israeli activists take a missionary approach to their queer (Palestinian) others. Drawing on a corpus of orientalist representations of Arab sexuality and a myopic chauvinism about the superiority of Western configurations of sexuality, they aim "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." According to Massad, this project largely succeeds in imposing a Western organization of sexuality onto non-Western Arab and Muslim contexts and destroying apparently more authentic "social and sexual configurations of desire."[21]

Massad's critique of the orientalist tendencies of Western queer activists, journalists, and academics who aim to "liberate" oppressed Arab (and Muslim) queers is irreproachable, but his analysis of the success of that project in the "Arab World" vastly overstates the power of the Gay International and misreads the actual implications of its project. The consumers of Israeli and Western representations of queer Palestinians are not Palestinians — queer or otherwise — but Israelis and Westerners. While Massad provides anecdotal evidence for the emergence among some Arab journalists and politicians of public discussions of homosexuality, he ignores the real impetus of the Gay International in focusing solely on the alleged impact this discourse has on (Arab) sexual activities. Most significantly, what his analysis misses is the figurative replacement of *queer* with *Arab*. For the racialized Arab emerges as the most salient and dangerous other, at the moment the homosexual, once the nation's sexual other, gains increasing acceptability. In this discursive regime, international activist projects directed at Arab queers are conceivable because they employ the terms of a conciliatory politics of visibility that positions the state as the guarantor of equality, rather than the source of inequality, and desirable because they "[provide] ammunition to

reinforce nationalist projects" through "the Orientalist invocation of the 'terrorist,'" a strategy that simultaneously distinguishes Western and Israeli queers from their Arab and Palestinian others and enlists them, though tentatively and incompletely, in the service of the nation.[22] The queer Arab/Palestinian, here, is little more than a narrative device for conjuring up the specter of his oppressor, the all-purpose enemy of the liberal state and its liberal queers: the dangerous, illiberal Arab (terrorist).[23]

If Massad fails to appreciate the effects of the Gay International in and on Western countries, he vastly overstates its effects in the Arab World, granting the Gay International the power to "heterosexualize" Arab societies by successfully subordinating Arabs to foreign Western "sexual categories and identities."[24] Palestinians in Israel—and in the Palestinian territories, for that matter—encounter and interact with Westerners (and, of course, Israelis) with a greater intensity and regularity than most Arabs in predominantly Arab states. But the impulse even to point out that distinction suggests two fundamental misunderstandings on which Massad bases his proclamations about self-identified "gay Arabs" (whom he describes as a minority "Westernized elite"): first, a misunderstanding of culture as a bounded and discrete thing that changes at glacial speed and is tied to a specific geographic locale, and second, a misunderstanding of globalization, a process that in Massad's account looks a lot like an orientalist fantasy of "authentic" Arab sexuality—a nonconsensual act of penetration by a more powerful actor.

The assumption that the emergence of self-identified Arab queers is a straightforward result of the colonial imposition of Western values is, at best, naive. At worst, it is insulting, especially to those Arab queers whom it caricatures as unsophisticated dupes of Western ideologues. Globalization is a hierarchically structured process in which certain ideas and discourses move, with greater force, in certain directions. But anthropologists, in particular, have pointed out for a long time the flaws in arguments that Western identity formations are supplanting alternative sexualities everywhere, showing both the creativity with which "non-Western" queers interact with "Western" constructs of sexuality and the resilience of "local" constructs. In dismissing self-identified Arab queers as essentially inauthentic replicas of their Western counterparts, Massad overlooks their capacity to act as conscious agents and risks "circumscrib[ing] the sorts of defensive and offensive actions that might be taken," and in fact are taken, against the missionary project of the Gay International.[25]

As I have argued, the point of contact between queer Palestinians and queer Israeli activists—understood broadly to include missionary discourses and the organizations that represent them—can be read as a sort of checkpoint.

Queer Israeli Jews are endowed with the power to inspect and then admit or deny queer Palestinians entry into the space of (Israeli) gayness. When Ganon interpolates his gay Palestinian victims, many respond accordingly, sometimes blindly, and sometimes with a strategic, even playful, awareness of the wider forces at play. But many, especially queer Palestinian activists, reject the encounter—the checkpoint—altogether. This is not to say that queer Palestinians avoid contact with queer Israeli Jews; rather, that they refuse to answer when hailed. They refuse to submit to the regulatory gaze of the Israeli state and its queer agents of nationalism. Rather than embark on an equally problematic project of coming out and establishing themselves as visible, integral parts of the "fabric" of the nation, they reject the language of visibility that dominates Western and Israeli queer activism, often in the name of the nation. Their project is not without its contradictions, and my goal is not to romanticize it as a utopian antidote to hegemonic modes of activism that normalize certain queers and marginalize others. In the discourse of queer Palestinian activists, however, there are some valuable lessons for Western and Israeli queer activists, who would do well to reconsider the utility of "identities and interests," the politics of gay rights and the narrative of the closet, in favor of "alternative affinities, different values, and reconstructed interests."[26] Rather than fight for social tolerance or acceptance, many queer Palestinian activists aim to instigate a movement for a radical social change, led by a coalition of diverse actors, from Palestinian civil society organizations to radical lesbian feminists, and guided by an understanding of "solidarity" as a cooperative engagement in the struggle for justice and equality, values reinterpreted in a way that refuses the standard divisions of identity politics.[27]

Beyond the Closet/Checkpoint

In my conversations with Haneen Maikey and Rauda Morcos—the current and former chairs of two queer Palestinian organizations, Al-Qaws and Aswat, respectively—both described their interactions with queer Western and Israeli journalists and activists in uniformly negative terms. "Sometimes I feel humiliated," Morcos explained. "They look at me as if I am in the zoo. . . . they have their ideas and stories, and they're not willing to ask whether that works for us." The "ideas and stories" with which journalists objectify queer Palestinians are inevitably stories of suffering and victimization. This persistent trope of the victim engenders in many queer Israeli activists—for whom, in the words of HaAguda's Hamel, "LGBT solidarity" is important—a desire to "help" or "rescue" their queer Palestinian counterparts. While such efforts are usually not as overtly paternalistic as

HaAguda's Palestinian Rescue Project, they frequently leave queer Palestinians with the feeling of humiliation Morcos discussed, but more often, with a sense of indignation. "I want to tell them loudly," Morcos said, "Leave us alone. Leave us alone." Morcos explained that, while she would like to "feel solidarity with these groups," their almost religious conviction that "they have found . . . the cure" makes the goal of solidarity an impossible one for queer Palestinians. Interestingly, Morcos likened the activist projects of Western and Israeli queers to Alcoholics Anonymous and the multilevel marketing company Herbalife. "It becomes a religion at a certain point. . . . Go to one meeting, and you'll throw up." And Maikey explained with a similar sense of frustration that, while Al-Qaws has "spent a lot of energy trying to explain to the Israeli gay movement that we are capable of helping ourselves," at a certain point, the endless overtures become a lot of "noise" that detracts from the organization's work.

If the "disease" that plagues queer Palestinians is an intolerant society that does not allow them to "come out," the "cure" of which Morcos spoke is invariably a politics of visibility. Unlike Massad's image of the Westernized Arab elites, queer Palestinians do not unself-consciously heed Israeli "healing calls." Visibility, Maikey explained, does not figure into Al-Qaws's goals. Morcos added that "there are different kinds of visibilities," and Western and Israeli queer activists do not generally understand that their kind of visibility "does not work for everyone." Queer Palestinians are not, in other words, passive victims of the missionary project of the Gay International (or the Gay Israeli); they are, in fact, fully conscious—and critical—of Western-Israeli gayness and the sometimes ridiculous assumptions about queer Palestinians. Their moment of confrontation with those discourses, the moment at my metaphorical checkpoint, is not one of capitulation but of refusal—a refusal based on the understanding that, in Maikey's words, occupying a position of "always responding . . . to Israelis or foreigners" prevents queer Palestinians from focusing on their "internal needs and feelings . . . the really important things."

Not just, however, a refusal to speak—a refusal, that is, to submit to the objectifying Israeli gaze and play a prefabricated role—queer Palestinian activists' encounters with Israeli and international activists have provided an unexpected opportunity for collective self-reflection and exploration. Maikey described the experience as "someone holding up a mirror to you and saying, 'Look. Tell me what you see.'" Rather than accept the invitation to engage in an "unequal dialogue about who we are," Maikey and her colleagues were prompted by that mirror to ask, "What does [it] mean? What are their expectations of us? What is the right mirror to hold in front of ourselves? And what do I see in it? It's not really what

they want me to see. . . . all of these questions were a trigger to liberate ourselves from their expectations."

What exactly liberation from those expectations would mean is a question activists have not answered—and perhaps cannot answer, given the complexity of identity for queer Palestinians in Israel—but it is a question with which they are passionately engaged. At a recent Al-Qaws retreat, attended by about thirty queer Palestinians, among the more-heated discussions was the question "Meen ihna?" (Who are we?). With vastly different opinions, the group debated the role and meaning of Israeliness, Palestinianness, gayness, and other modes of identification; the extent to which there is a we in the first place; and the authenticity of this we. Fully cognizant of accusations of inauthenticity—from actors as diverse as Massad and Islamist leaders—and, at the same time, determined not to normalize a particular "model" of identity that might privilege some and exclude others, the leaders and members of Al-Qaws have settled on an organizational structure based on a radical respect for diversity and democratic participation. The organization regularly holds open events in which members of the community are invited, not simply to take advantage of "social services" but to contribute actively to defining Al-Qaws's mission and activities.

Al-Qaws has established as its goal the promotion of a queer Palestinian community, a project that, as the organization's mission statement explains, "is inextricably linked with the larger project of building an equal, diverse, and open Palestinian society . . . that internalizes the non-hierarchical diversity of sexual and gender identity." Al-Qaws's practical efforts to realize that goal range from creating "safe" social spaces for queer Palestinians—of all ages, citizenship statuses, class positions, and religious, sexual, and gender identities—to publishing a series of Arabic-language booklets that aim "to create a space for public discourse on sexual and gender diversity in Palestinian society," to pushing Israeli and Palestinian civil society organizations to confront the complexities of identity in Israel-Palestine—all of which, incidentally, demonstrate that their politics is not a retreat from the public sphere.

The eventual success of queer Palestinian activism is not my concern here. My point, rather, is that queer Palestinian activists have refused to emulate Western and Israeli activists' politics of visibility, which takes its terms from the lexicon of neoliberalism and articulates its demands in a way that justifies state violence against racial others in exchange for recognition of a victimized class of domesticated queers. In that refusal, queer Palestinians can imagine a kind of activism that does not avoid politics in favor of normalization but articulates a vision of a society transformed by a fundamental restructuring of power. Rather than orga-

nize around a common identification as "gays and lesbians," their activism aims to create a community based on a "common identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality."[28] Such a community would not demand of the liberal state that it recognize and protect victimized queers, but that it live up to the promise of its democratic ideals.

Conclusion

Against the backdrop of their constant encounters at the checkpoints of Israeli (and Western) gayness — which, as the word *checkpoint* suggests, are functions of the state and its disciplinary power — queer Palestinian activists are fashioning a movement that, in its refusal to submit to the narrative structure of the checkpoint, challenges its underlying logic: the state's impulse to see — that is, to classify and contain potentially threatening others in intelligible categories that can be easily regulated.[29] Their refusal is not, contrary to the assumptions of queer Israelis, a refusal to leave the closet but a rejection of the language of the closet altogether, a reliance not on the projection of visible, intelligible subjects but on the subversion of the state's need to see in the first place.

My emphasis here on the subversive potential of queer Palestinian activism, in the face of activist paradigms that draw on the politics of visibility and racist discourses of the other to reinstate a privileged citizen-self, is not meant to minimize the violence of that encounter or the limitations it imposes. I have passed through enough checkpoints to know that refusal — of the state's military power at the border or the social power of the doorman at the bar — carries with it sometimes painful consequences, and the will to mobility often dictates a careful, strategic performance of self. My goal, rather, is to suggest a reorientation from an activism based on an imagined solidarity of out "gays and lesbians" to a solidarity based on the radical democratic dream of a world in which "the courageous anonymity of subjectivities in play" is the imperative, rather than the negation, of (queer) citizenship and belonging.[30] The goal of such an activism would not be the collective movement out of the closet and into the space of the nation but the creation of a space, outside the state's regulatory gaze and beyond the reach of its checkpoints, where bodies, desires, and identifications — queer or not — might proliferate, in all their perverse and incoherent glory.

Notes

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1. Alejandro Lugo, "Theorizing Border Inspections," *Cultural Dynamics* 12 (2000): 355; John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992), 27.
2. Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 18, 27.
3. During eighteen months of fieldwork in Israel-Palestine in 2007 and 2008, I conducted unstructured interviews of approximately two hours in duration with Mike Hamel, the chair of HaAguda, and Shaul Ganon, the leader of its Palestinian Rescue Project; Sa'ar Netanel, a prominent activist and openly gay member of the Jerusalem city council; and Rauda Morcos, the former chair of Aswat, a Palestinian lesbian organization based in Haifa. With Haneen Maikey, the chair of Al-Qaws, a queer Palestinian organization based in Jerusalem, I conducted two formal interviews and, as a volunteer for Al-Qaws and regular participant in its meetings and events, had countless informal conversations that have informed my argument here. These interviews are only a few of the many I conducted as part of my dissertation research with a large number of queer Palestinian activists and "ordinary" people in Israel, Jerusalem, and the West Bank (including a smaller number of queer Israeli Jews).
4. Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 161; Massad, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 361–85.
5. Yossi Klein Halevi, "Tel Aviv Dispatch: Refugee Status," *New Republic*, August 19, 2002, www.tnr.com/article/refugee-status.
6. An incomplete but revealing list of sources that rely on Halevi's article ranges from the more-balanced Michael Kagan and Anat Ben-Dor, *Nowhere to Run: Palestinian Asylum-Seekers in Israel* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Buchman Faculty of Law, 2008), available online at www.law.tau.ac.il/Heb/Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/NowheretoRun.pdf, to the neoconservative gay writer James Kirchick's "Queer Theory: The Columbia Professor Who Also Doesn't Think Gay People Exist in the Arab World," *New Republic*, October 15, 2007, reprinted by Daniel Pipes's Campus Watch, www.campus-watch.org/article/id/4253. Halevi's article is also, for example, heavily

cited in an American Zionist organization's anti-Palestinian public relations materials (StandWithUs, "LGBT Rights under the Palestinian Authority" [2007], www.standwithus.org/pdfs/flyers/LGBT_booklet.pdf); the BBC journalist Brian Whitaker's popular book, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and an absurd "quiz" about gay rights published in a Chicago gay publication that attempts to demonstrate the hypocrisy of "leftist" gays who support Palestinians (Paul Varnell, "Israel, Palestine, and Gays," *Chicago Free Press*, August 28, 2002).

7. For some popular examples of Ganon's expertise in action, see Mazal Mualem, "Mecha`a `al girosh homo`eem filasteeneem lagada" ("Protest against the Deportation of Gay Palestinians to the West Bank"), *Haaretz*, March 6, 2003; William Goodwin, "Palestine's Oppression of Gays Should Not Be Ignored," *Daily Trojan*, March 13, 2003; Bret Stephens, "Gay Pride—and Israel's," *Jerusalem Post*, June 19, 2003; Dan Williams, "Palestinian Gay Runaways Survive in Israeli Streets," *Reuters News*, September 17, 2003; "Palestinian Gays Flee to Israel," *BBC News*, October 22, 2003; Dan Baron, "Palestinian Gays Seek Safety in Israel," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 15, 2004; Eric Beauchemin, "In Limbo—Gay Palestinians," *Radio Netherlands*, August 3, 2004; Ray Moran, "Ve ma `im redifat homo`eem filasteeneem bi rashot?" ("And What about the Persecution of Gay Palestiniansin the PA?"), *Maariv*, July 20, 2006.
8. Although my focus here is on Israel, it is my position, following Étienne Balibar, that Israel is only one extreme illustration of the broader truth that "racism . . . maintains a necessary relation with *nationalism* and contributes to constituting it by producing the fictive ethnicity around which it is organized" (Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Class, Nation* [London: Verso, 1991], 49).
9. See, e.g., Sherry Lowrance, "Being Palestinian in Israel: Identity, Protest, and Political Exclusion," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25 (2005): 487–99.
10. James Kirchick, "Queers for Palestine?" *Advocate*, January 28, 2009, www.advocate.com/exclusive_detail_ektid71844.asp. See also Libby Post, "Supporting Israel—It's the Gay Thing to Do," shewired.com, January 12, 2009, www.shewired.com/Article.cfm?ID=21339.
11. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 50. On the normalization of "queerness" in Israel and Zionist uses of the discourse of "tolerance," see Alisa Solomon, "Viva La Diva Citizenship: Post-Zionism and Gay Rights," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 149–65.
12. The following story offers one concrete example of how queer Israeli liberalism is mobilized so as to justify violence against Palestinians. Back in December 2008

Haneen Maikey translated into Hebrew a series of SMS messages she received from a gay man in Gaza, describing his feelings as Israeli bombs fell around him. The text was then posted on a gay Israeli Web site, and elicited many responses. A number of readers posted sympathetic responses, but most readers either dismissed the piece as unreliable fabricated (pro-Palestinian) "propaganda" or, worse, justified the imposition of Israeli military violence with reference to the homophobia of Hamas. "Is he aware," asked one respondent, "that his 'enemy' is a humane state that respects gays and grants [gays like himself] more extensive rights than many other countries?" Another reader wondered "why the poor guy is not fighting Hamas . . . a racist organization whose goal is not only the elimination of Israel and the Jews, but also the murdering of gays." A great number of responses followed a similar "logic." (Translations from Hebrew are my own.)

13. Adi Kuntsman, "The Soldier and the Terrorist: Sexy Nationalism, Queer Violence," *Sexualities* 11 (2008): 162, 161.
14. Although not explicitly "queer," Women in Black (www.womeninblack.org) and Anarchists Against the Wall (www.awalls.org) are among several anti-occupation Israeli organizations whose members include radical queers. And as one critical reviewer for this article pointed out, some queer organizations—for example, Black Laundry and Jerusalem Open House—have challenged the activism of those such as HaAguda. It is, however, telling that, while HaAguda boasts broad name recognition, a substantial budget, and local branches throughout Israel, Black Laundry is a now defunct group that was unknown to the vast majority of queer Israelis and Palestinians, including activists. Two prior directors of Jerusalem Open House, Hagai El-Ad and Noa Sattah, were vocal critics of the occupation, and Open House initiated a "Palestinian" project that evolved into Al-Qaws, the first legally recognized organization for queer Palestinians. As far as I could discern during my fieldwork, however, proponents of the view that "gay" issues and "political" issues like racism and the occupation are unrelated seem to have prevailed in the early debate that some Open House activists described to me. Additionally, but not insignificantly, the organization has not adopted a stance on Israeli policies toward Palestinians, and it offers no programming or services directed at Palestinians or speakers of Arabic.
15. Martin F. Manalansan IV, "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma," *GLQ* 2 (1995): 486.
16. Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23.
17. Brown, *States of Injury*, 27.
18. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 215.
19. Among Ganon's most interesting inaccuracies was his proclamation that the Arabic word for lesbian, *sahiqiyya*, comes "from the word, 'games,' because she's really just

playing games," a broader statement, for Ganon, about "the Arab culture," in which a woman who says "I want" will inevitably be answered with, "What? You don't want. You are a possession of the man." In fact, *sahiqiyya* is a derogatory term that comes from the root for "to grind" or "crush," but if pronounced with a contemporary Israeli Hebrew accent, it sounds much like the Hebrew word for "to play." Most of Ganon's "knowledge" about "Arabs," while presented as objective truth, is similarly refracted through the lens of Israeli culture.

20. Raz Yosef, "The National Closet: Gay Israel in *Yossi and Jagger*," *GLQ* 11 (2005): 286.
21. Massad, "Gay International," 362, 383, 385.
22. Jasbir K. Puar, "Mapping US Homonormativities," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 13 (2006): 68.
23. The American Israeli director Eytan Fox's popular film *The Bubble* (Israel, 2006) takes this equation to its logical conclusion: the queer Palestinian victim becomes the terrorist.
24. Massad, "Gay International," 381, 385.
25. J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Querying Globalization," in *Post-Colonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 244.
26. Janet R. Jakobsen, "Sex + Freedom = Regulation: Why?" *Social Text*, no. 84–85 (2005): 304.
27. A related criticism of identity politics is outlined in Ziv's discussion of a "politics of identification" of the radical Israeli queer activist group Black Laundry. See her essay in this issue.
28. Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Citizenship and the Political Community," in *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, and Community*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Verso, 1992), 236.
29. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).
30. Silviano Santiago, "The Wily Homosexual (First—and Necessarily Hasty—Notes)," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 18.