7. On framing and de-framing the queer Arab

Iskandar Abdalla

Prologue: "Hadi"

Hadi walks through the streets of the city. His steps are sluggish, and his face wears a melancholic expression and a sense of despair. In the background, we hear his aunt talking to him on the phone, scolding him in Arabic. "Get out, you whore, you sodomite, […] Hopefully, you will die the most terrible death." But Hadi wants to live. After she hangs up, we see him arriving to buy strawberries at the weekly market on *Winterfeldtplatz*, only a few meters away from the gay heart of Berlin in Schöneberg.

This is the scene that opens the television documentary "*Allah weiß, dass ich schwul bin*,"[1] produced by the RBB, the German public broadcaster for Berlin and Brandenburg. Then filmmaker Andreas Bernhardt tells the audience about himself and his interest in filming Hadi. During his travels in North Africa, Andreas recounts, he has met many gay men who have fled "the death lists of religious fanatics" and have come to Europe. He says he was not able to convince any of them to be filmed until Hadi, a Lebanese refugee, crossed his path. Andreas and Hadi have agreed to meet at *CSD*, the annual Berlin Gay Pride Parade. The camera wanders through the festivities capturing naked brown bodies posing and dancing vivaciously. Yet Hadi does not arrive. Unlike those who have made it to the celebration, he seems stuck in his daily troubles.

In the rest of the documentary, Andreas will be the facilitator of Hadi's "safe arrival," the helper and decoder who lends him a voice, brings his story to the light, helps him to navigate the barriers of language and bureaucracy and eventually helps us, the audience, to decipher the alleged predicament of being queer[2] and Arab, or

1 Andreas Bernhardt/Armin Faust (2020) Allah weiß, dass ich schwul bin. RBB, December 12 (https://www.rbb-online.de/unserleben/reportagen/allah-weiss-dass-ich-schwul-bin.html).

2 In this chapter I am using the term "queer", not as an alternative to "LGBT", but as an umbrella term that encloses the latter term and compliments it with a perspective that recognizes the fluidity of sexual and gender identity without necessarily denying the urge of some to cohere to a stable subject. I am also using to the term to stress the political connotations attached to it through its deployment by queer theory since the 1990s to ascribe a "positionality vis-a-

being queer and Muslim: an oxymoronic[3] being for Western sensibilities. Hadi's story is staged as one of consecutive miseries: fleeing Lebanon, being rejected, threatened, beaten up by his relatives, bullied, deceived, even raped by his Arab compatriots. Hadi appears to represent an exemplary case of a larger "problem." He is the victim, the body in which the problem is enacted and manifested, without being eligible to *frame it.* He is not the one who maps the outlines of the problem and charts a way out.

Framing Hadi's problem is the mission the camera embarks on, charting its course along specific itineraries. First, Andreas confers with an "expert on Islam" who blames Hadi's agony on religious homophobia rooted in the traditions of Islam, as justified by its authoritative texts and widely practiced by its believers. Then he speaks to a sociologist who draws upon similar incidents of violence and who complicates the frame by blaming Hadi's misery on "cultural aspects" and "social backgrounds" outside of religion. Finally, he consults the law enforcement institution designated to intervene to protect Hadi's body from the violence of his family and compatriots: the police. "Are you afraid? You should not be afraid of the German Police," says Andreas to his puzzled protagonist. At the end of the journey, Hadi is asked whether – after all that has happened to him – he still believes in God. He eventually restates his faith, giving the report its catchy title.

The frame in which Hadi's story is presented to us appears to have a temporal depth: a past that haunts Hadi violently in the present, and a present he cannot yet arrive in. To bridge the divide, Hadi's "background" is illuminated by expert knowledge, while his body is placed under the oversight of state authorities entitled to guard and protect its surfaces. Only then can the present be freed from the past and Hadi's arrival become attainable.

This contribution is not about Hadi, but about the *frame* within which his body is staged and contained – as extended, by proxy, to the bodies of queer Arab migrants in general. It attends to the frame's (mis)representations; its limits and offlimits; the knowledge it assembles within its structure and the knowledge it simultaneously shuts out. My endeavor is to unshroud the power of framing, not merely by sketching out the modalities of its operation, but also by underscoring how they are resisted and subverted by Arab queer migrants via discursive procedures, which I call *outframing* and *de-framing*. My intention is evidently not to question the veracity of Hadi's experience, but to point out the occlusion of confusing the framing of an experience with what is deemed to be its truth. After illustrating what characterizes such a frame, I will proceed with the attempts to maneuver its lines by silenc-

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vis normativity" at odds with dominant modes of thought and living. See David M. Halperin (1995) Saint Foucault. Towards A Gay Hagiography. New York: Oxford University Press: 62.

3 El-Tayeb, Fatima (2012) Gays who cannot properly be gay. Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European city. In: European Journal for Women's studies 19 (1) February: 89.

ing what it pushes to announce; to frame *out* what it urges to represent. Then I will discuss with the attempts to *de-frame* its entire structure and reclaim queerness in radical ways. In doing so, I am drawing mainly on ethnographic data I have gathered in Berlin.

The Frame

The modes of framing mentioned above are by no means specific to Andreas' camera, nor to Hadi's body. "*Allah weiß, dass ich schwul bin*" is one of various mediums in which the frame is manifested; one of the myriad variants of configuring and replicating it. The modes of framing at work precede style and language, travel across mediums and genres, establish and validate perceptions. They also render experiences of those who are framed as truthful, but only insofar as they can be accommodated within a certain narrative that qualifies them as *reasonably true*.

The modes of framing queer migrants from Arab-speaking countries in Germany include the trope of resorting to Islam as a chief marker of their identity – the eminent domain that would instruct us most about their plight. Their struggle is usually subsumed under a binary of "Islam" versus "homosexuality", both often understood as self-evident and self-contained categories. Homophobia is often Islamized, not necessarily in the sense of regarding it as fundamentally Islamic, but as impelled and (falsely) justified by Islamic texts and traditions. In this logic, ending homophobia must claim and visibly realize the reconcilability of both Islam and homosexuality, often under the premise of first undertaking certain reforms to qualify the former in order to accept the latter. The dominance of this framework is evident in numerous media articles and reports featuring Arab queer refugees and migrants,[4] in political debates about migration, in the pedagogy of integration and programs of sexual education, and in academic symposia and conferences.[5]

It would be unsound to deny the productivity of such a framework for scholarly contributions about homosexuality in Islamic thought and historical practices,[6]

4 E.g. Constantin Schreiber (2018) Moscheereport: Islam und Homosexualität. In: Tagesschau, April 28 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I0dRCzs1hvs) Jaafar Abdul Karim (2020) ana mithli wa-ʿarabi wa muslim. DW Jaafar Talk, October 10 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GKRObpRaqWM).

5 Caroline Ausserer (2016) Religion und Homosexualität – ein Vermeintlicher Wiederspruch. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung December 20 https://www.boell.de/de/2016/12/20/too-queer-believe-religion-und-homosexualitaet-ein-vermeintlicher-widerspruch.

6 A significant contribution to this stance of scholarship is the work of Andreas Ismael Mohr in German and Scott Kugle in English. See Andreas Ismael Mohr (2020) Schwules muslimisches Nachdenken über Gotteswort und Prophetenüberlieferung. In: Lamya Kaddor (ed.) Muslimisch und liberal! Was einen zeitgemäßen Islam ausmacht. Munich: Piper: 236–246. Scott

or to revoke its potential to forge modes of identification and sense-making for many queer Muslims around the globe. My claim is rather that the persistence of this framework as the principal fulcrum of queer experience of Arab migrants in the West warrants critical inquiry. We need to scrutinize how it pre-shapes the very possibilities of speaking about Arab queerness; how it makes some aspects publicly voiced by the same conditions of ruling out others. Even when it is in the name of calling them out, of pushing them away from the burdens of their past and fostering their arrival in the present, the *interpellation* of queer migrants, refugees, and queers of color as simply "Muslims" fixes them in a predefined location that reenacts their (racial) otherness. Queer "Muslims" become queer in a sense *despite* their Islam or culture, or when they are urged to embody the ideal of reconciliation (or the moment they do so).

What might seem like an unfitting generalization cannot be separated from the larger mechanisms through which Islam is racialized, in the sense of allowing certain differences to be fixed as "Islamic" and certain bodies to be primarily identified (and recognized) in terms of the collective religious or cultural meanings they allegedly bear.[7] It should be noted, however, that reading certain queer bodies as simply Muslims is not always an unequivocal process. In the same framework, notions of "Arab culture," "traditions," or "social background" are often invoked, whether as side effects to the allegedly homophobic work of Islam, or external components that have leaked into its edifice and need to be filtered out. Such invocations alone would not topple the racialized structures ingrained in framing modalities, as long as they do not question the mechanisms of othering and stigmatization, and as long as naturalizing difference and fixing otherness remains intact under other labels. Islam, "Arab culture," and "social background" often remain entangled, if not interchangeable, in this context, insofar as they take on the same work of naturalizing difference and fixing otherness.

Although I am writing here specifically on queers who are read – or who identify in heterogeneous ways – as "Arabs", it must be clear by now that I am not suggesting simply replacing "queer Muslims" with "queer Arabs." In a German context where race is reconfigured as religion and/or culture, and whiteness is recoded as "post-racial"[8], the point is not to opt for a more accurate term to identify a collective, but rather to pay attention to what the procedure of signifying a collective does; what

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Kugle (2010) Homosexuality in Islam: Critical reflections on Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Muslims. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

7 Yasmin Shooman (2012) Das Zusammenspiel von Kultur, Religion, Ethnizität und Geschlecht im antimuslimischen Rassismus. In: Ungleichheit, Ungerechtigkeit. Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte, Vol. 62 (https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/130422/das-zusammenspiel-von-kultur-religion-ethnizitaet-und-geschlecht-im-antimuslimischen-rassismus/).

8 Jennifer Petzen (2012) Queer Trouble: Centering Race in Queer and Feminist Politics. In: Journal of Intercultural Studies, 33 (3) June: 291.

it undoes; and how it structures knowledge in ways permeated by racial formations and embedded in power relations. It is to regard culturalist framing with suspicion, not only for serving as an "essential tool for making 'other'"[9], as Lila Abu-Lughod notes, but also for how it effectuates otherness by isolating those identified as others from the political and historical realms that asymmetrically attach them to the self. Recalling Spivak's famous phrase of "white men saving brown women from brown men," Abu-Lughod points elsewhere to the "haunting resonance" of culturalist framings of oppression with colonial legacies.[10]

Pertinent to this is another discursive mode through which the frame operates: what has applied for brown women, increasingly applies today for brown queers and gay men. The frame under scrutiny is characterized by a temporal geography that organizes bodies into victims and saviors; vulnerable ones stuck in archaic times and violently dragged into them, versus contemporaneous others, at once liberated and liberators, urged to uncover the former from the patina of time and help them into the present. The inclusion of Arab queer migrants becomes conditioned, first, upon their embodiment of "ideal victimhood"[11] marked by a linear passage from the past into the future, from captivity to freedom, from alienation to self-realization; and second, upon the presence of those who are entitled to facilitate their temporal and cultural conversion and to protect them from possible pushbacks. The latter are mostly white women and men in whose bodies the signs of arrival become generic. They qualify as "properly gay", to rephrase Fatima El-Tayeb.[12] El-Tayeb links such a frame, not only to racial politics, but also to neoliberal modes of urban mobility; to "a spatial politics in which marginalized groups are not completely expelled from the city [...] but remain excluded and contained through their failure to achieve consumer-citizen status."[13] This resonates with another trope that features in the modes of framing under scrutiny, particularly in a city like Berlin. This city is often promoted as a cosmopolitan queer safe haven where diverse scripts of self-realization and identity-making are viable.[14] The problem with that claim lies not in its lack of empirical support; after all, for some, queer social realities unfurl in the city, while for others they do not. It lies rather in how reiterating this same claim often becomes

9 Lila Abu-Lughod (2006) Writing Against Culture. In: Anthropology in Theory: Issues in Epistemology, ed. Henrietta Moore & Todd Sanders, Oxford: Blackwell: 470.

10 Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) Do Muslim Women Need Saving? MA: Harvard University Press: 33.

11 N. Christie (1986) The Ideal Victim. In: From Crime Policy to Victim Policy, E.A Fattah, ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan: 18.

12 El-Tayeb, Fatima (2012) 'Gays who cannot properly be gay': Queer Muslims in the neoliberal European City. European Journal of Women's Studies, February 27, 19 (1): 88.

13 Ibid.: 81.

14 Cf. Jennifer Petzen (2004) Home or Home-Like. Turkish Queers Manage Space in Berlin. In: Space & Culture, 7 (1) February: 21. Ruth Preser (2017) Lost and found in Berlin: identity, ontology and the emergence of Queer Zion. In: Gender. In: Place & Culture, 24 (3): 413–425.

a tool to deny forms of homophobia[15] and to efface struggles, sufferings, experiences of fetishization, racialization, and exclusion that inculcate the relationship of many queer migrants to Berlin on daily basis.

How do queer Arab migrants engage with such modes of framing? How do their experiences of fetishization, racialization, and exclusion challenge the very grounds upon which the claims of inclusion and protection stand? How do they reprocess and challenge the frame's invocations of identities, ordering of bodies, staging of possibilities, and references to time and space? The following two sections will hopefully lead us to an answer.

Out-framing: Mahmood's silence

Mahmood came to Berlin in his mid-twenties, not as a refugee, as many have mistaken him to be, but as a university student. Now, after finding a job he likes, he hopes this will improve his chances of securing his own rental apartment in Berlin – something he has been unable to find since moving to the city.

> "I did so many things here … I went to many places … I met so many people … but every night I still go to bed with the feeling that I have no home."[16] In five years, he lived in eight different places in four neighborhoods. He doesn't even remember how many housing requests he submitted in those years that remained unanswered. "I used different nicknames. I told them that I am gay … that I am student, not a refugee, that I don't smoke, that I drink alcohol, but only socially. I wanted them to know that I am not the kind of Arab guy they might think I am, neither the type who is too religious, nor the loser who drinks all the time."

Mahmood identifies as gay, yet never drinks alcohol. He thinks, that speaking about drinking habits in this context is much like revealing his homosexuality, a way of "polishing" his rental applications to increase his chances, as he puts it. Mahmood's attempts to "polish" his identity to gain access to the housing market reveal both his understanding that his relationship to the city is structured by his racial difference, and his awareness of possible ways to navigate such structures and racialized imaginaries.

In his quest to find a new home, Mahmood invokes his homosexuality, not to demand acceptance or to underline his legitimate right to live in an atmosphere where

15 Cf. Ahmed Awadalla (2021) From Cairo to Berlin: Architectures of Homophobia. Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, Dec 1 (https://www.boell.de/en/2021/12/01/cairo-berlin-architectures-homophobia).

16 This section is based on two interviews conducted with Mahmood (name changed) in January 2017 and September 2021.

his sexuality must not be curtailed or confronted with hostility, but to counteract the racialized imaginaries his Arabness invokes in others: a "refugee", either "too religious", or an alcoholic "loser." It does not really matter whether he is telling the truth (identifying as gay) or a lie (drinking alcohol). What matters is that he places himself within a frame in which Arabness can be rendered desirable; or rather frames his identity in ways that contradict how Arabness is invoked and imagined, in an effort to invalidate its racial charge.

It is, however, to be noted that navigating racial structures never operates in specified directions, it is rather contingent upon unpredictable measures and can yield an outcome opposite to what was sought. "I got once a polite rejection email telling me I was one of the nicest guys among the potential flat mates, but they preferred to rent the room out to a refugee." Mahmood recalls this incident, ironically noting that he probably acted "too nice for an Arab."

Navigating racialized imaginaries is also a process that is coupled with anxieties and doubts: doubts about oneself, doubts about how truthful or righteous it might be to perform certain scripts of identity, and doubts about how to live up to one's own desires while being desirable to others. On dating apps, Mahmood fears that disclosing his Arabness might make people less interested in him. At other times, he thinks the opposite and choses "Arab" under the category of "ethnicity" included in some dating apps. He even embellishes his profile with self-descriptions like "macho" or "dominant Arab" knowing that resorting to such clichés will make him desirable to many. But sometimes, Mahmood feels remorse at "painting a self-image" that does not relate to how he sees himself, to how he understands his sexuality and desires others. "It is not that I can't play the macho… But still, it is not me. It is not how I want to be. It is tiring to feel that you are always confined to certain roles."

Mahmood concedes that Berlin has given him sexual freedoms he never dreamt of having. At the same time, the city assigns him certain roles, images, performances, and scripts upon which being recognized and granted (sexual) freedoms are contingent and become meaningful in the first place. To make the city home, to be visible and desirable it becomes incumbent upon him to act within the confines of a predefined frame. Navigating through the architecture of that frame is not just about *fitting in*, but also about defiantly *keeping out*. It means, in Mahmood's words, not only to know "what to say when and for whom" but also "what you should better keep silent about." To elaborate on this point, I will go back to my first encounter with Mahmood in Berlin.

It was Gay Pride in the summer of 2016. We met, not at the mainstream parade, but at the alternative *Kreuzberg Transgender Christopher Street Day.*[17] As members of

17 The Kreuzberger TCSD is deemed Berlin's alternative queer pride to be critical of commercialization attempts and committed to an anti-racist agenda. See Jin Haritaworn (2015) Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regenerating Violent Times and Places. London: Pluto Press: 1-2.

the Berlin-based interreligious initiative *Salaam-Schalom*,[18] I and our coordinator Armin Langer had been invited to give a short speech on the main stage of the parade. After the speech, Mahmood and I joined other acquaintances: Fabian, a gay teacher in his late 30s, was there with his Syrian boyfriend. Fabian expressed his admiration for the speech and the work being done by *Salaam-Schalom*, particularly in two respects. He first praised what he perceived as the initiative's focus on combining racism and homophobia, noting that "complaining about racism" was an important cause, but it became more credible by also speaking up loudly against antisemitism and homophobia, as both phenomena in his opinion were widespread among migrants in Germany. Secondly, Fabian admired that on stage we remained "apolitical." He perceived our action as an attempt to speak about the commonalities between Islam and Judaism, while keeping political conflicts in the Middle East at bay because, in his opinion, the issue of co-existence in Germany was at stake.

It was this latter point that represented a paradox for Mahmood. While for him, accepting himself as gay did not make dismissing Islam altogether inevitable, this self-acceptance for him nevertheless implied being "silent" in certain instances regarding religion and its moral dictations, which he thought we could never fully grasp.

> "I am not really religious myself," he said. "So, what obliges you here, in a free and secular country, away from your family and from religious people, to speak as a Muslim as long as you are not religious yourself? If you do not pray, if you do not fast, if you drink alcohol, what is the point in demonstrating your Muslimness on stage [...] for a dancing crowd who just want to party and have fun?"

Mahmood's suggestion to "mute" religion, or not to speak in its name in what he perceives to be a secular context of Gay Pride stirred a controversy among the conversation partners, he told me later. Fabian and his boyfriend accused him of being "politically irresponsible," of playing down the violence of religiously motivated homophobia and ignoring the fact that even in Germany, gay Muslims have difficulties coming out. Eventually, their overt irritation apparently silenced Mahmood for the rest of the evening.

The whole conversation left an aftertaste I pondered about for weeks. How come what was meant to be – or at least what I personally thought of as – a queer political intervention was celebrated for its allegedly intentional silence about politics in the name of promoting co-existence? And how, in the same context, did Mahmood's wish to be silent about Islam become an enraging and irresponsible act ignorant to

18 The Salam-Schalom initiative was founded in 2013 by Jewish and Muslim activists in Berlin to promote solidarity among coreligionists in Germany and build a common alliance against antisemitism and all forms of racism. See Elisabeth Becker (2021) Mosques in the Metropolis: Incivility, Case and Contention in Europe. Chicago: Chicago University Press: 113.

the pain of others? What makes speaking (un)political? When does the lack of politics become irresponsible and when does its presence become a threat for peace and co-existence?

Drawing on Nancy Fraser – in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, albeit in a different context – Jason Ritchie calls our attention to a mode of liberal gay activism in which politics becomes "conceivable and appropriate [. . .] only to the extent that it shies away from 'transformative' demands in favor of affirmative remedies for injustices" without disturbing "the framework" that underlies their social arrangement.[19] In such a model, the acceptance and visibility of racialized queer bodies becomes contingent upon their mutation of certain political claims and identity configurations.

On the stage of the *Kreuzberger TCSD,* however, muting politics, i.e., Palestine, is not the only qualification needed for queer Arabs to be placed properly within the frame. That frame incites and assembles even as it mutes and separates. Mahmood's will to mute Islam sits uncomfortably with a disposition of stimulating discourses on "Islam", or what Schirin Amir-Moazami describes as "summoning Muslims to discourse" (*Aufforderung zum Diskurs*) in the sense that Muslims are invited, and indeed also invite themselves, to speak as Muslim subjects.[20] What should not be inferred here is that the category "Muslim", a marker of identity and a signifier of certain modes of reasoning and feeling, is in itself void of any meaning prior to its invocation by others. For many queers who identify as Muslims, including Mahmood, Islam remains a substantial domain of engagement in their ways of living and in their pursuit of making sense. The point is that engagement with Islam does not take place in a discursive void. Instead, it is anchored within a whole field of invocations, perceptions of identity, conceptions of truth, even desires and sexual fantasies that translates certain configurations of power and allows them to unfold and endure. The ways in which all these relate to the individual's quest to fashion a Muslim self are complex and multidirectional. In some cases, they coexist, impelling each other in parallel or similar directions, prompting some to "come out" and raise their voices as "public Muslims"[21], even if in the same breath they "stress that they are not believers or not practicing their religion."[22] While in the case of Mahmood their relation seems to be characterized by tensions that articulate silence as a mode

19 Jason Ritchie (2010) How Do You Say, 'Come Out of the Closest' in Arabic? Queer Activism and Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine. In: GLQ A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 16 (4): 561.

20 Schirin Amir-Moazami (2018) Einleitung. In: Der Inspizierte Muslim: Zur Politisierung der Islamforschung in Europa, ed. Schirin Amir-Moazami, Bielefeld: transcript: 11.

21 Riem Spielhaus (2010) Media Making Muslim: The construction of a Muslim Community in Germany through media debate. In: Contemporary Islam 4 (1): 14.

22 Ibid., 16.

of disrupting pre-established settings of communication; a will of *unbecoming* utterly "Muslim," not in absolute terms or once and for all, but only in conjecture with certain enunciations of sexuality. To unbecome in this sense is to unsettle the interpellation's structure that summons Muslimness where it ought to be framed; to alter the very law that hails the Muslim subject into being so that "a creative and transformative politics of becoming" can become possible.[23] Unbecoming Muslim in this conjecture is becoming Muslim, but *outside of the frame*.

It is a "becoming undone," to use Butler's vocabulary, that undoes prior normative conceptions of Muslimness, to "inaugurate relatively newer one that has greater livability as its aim."[24] Mahmood does not want to become the gay Muslim (or the gay Arab) he is hailed to be – neither the one who circumscribes his desires, nor the one who frames him as desirable in a different context. "*Al-sukut ʿalamat al-rida*" or "silence is the sign of approval" is an Arabic say he recalls while elaborating on what he meant by silence in this context. His intention is not to say that Islam inevitably denounces homosexuality, but rather to question the claim that it inevitably advocates it. What troubles him is not that one can be at once gay and Muslin, as he himself is, but rather when one is compelled to speak as a Muslim expressing public approval for something already implied in private. Instead of viewing such a disposition as contradictory, I argue for re-attending to silence as a creative possibility to self-craft a being that is "beside oneself" and outside a framework of recognition that establishes our legitimacy but fails to do justice to what "tear us from ourselves [...] and implicates us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly."[25] "I am Muslim and Arab yes. But I am a gay Egyptian too. I took part in the revolution. I am a hobby photographer. I go to the gym. I love techno and I do not eat spinach. My flatmate wants to kick me out and I will be homeless in two weeks. Why do my Muslimness or Arabness matter more than all that followed? Can't you all just be indifferent about that?" Mahmood asks. Provoked by his question, which does not exempt my research endeavor from the culpability of reproducing the same paradigm of (mis)recognition, I ended our conversation, hoping that I had not pressed him to talk about things he would have preferred to keep silent about.

De-framing: Queer Arab Barty

Mahmood's take on silence should not prompt us to re-frame certain modes of queerness as "authentically" prone to silence. Silence is a discursive technique to

23 Mary Bunch (2013) The Unbecoming subject of sex: Performativity, interpellation and the politics of queer theory. In: Feminist Theory 14 (1): 40.

24 Judith Butler (2004) Undoing Gender. New York: Routledge: 1.

25 Ibid.: 20.

constitute identity and negotiate possibilities of being within and in relation to folds of power. Silence might be the opposite of speech, but it is never the negation of discourse. Michel Foucault reminds us that "there is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say."[26] Instead of presuming such a binary, we should identify the different ways of saying or not saying things; the different incitements to speak and the different inhibitions or restrictions that lock speech. As much as silence can loosen the holds of power "and provide for a relatively obscure area of tolerance," it also can be sheltering power and "anchoring its prohibitions."[27] Mahmood's appeal for a form of silence is in itself a call to discourse; an attempt to break other silences in the frame. Mahmood does so by calling upon the differentiation between realms of exposure. He negotiates the grips of discourse by maneuvers of concealment and defies framing by being willing to stand – at least partly – out of sight and longing for indifference to belonging.

Other queer Arab voices in Berlin, though willing to resist the confines of the frame, do not endorse silence and indifference or cannot afford them in the first place. In 2019, the collective *Queer Arab Barty* was founded in Berlin by a group of "queer diaspora Arabs" out of a desire for a space that would be both "pleasurable [and] relatable". What the founders longed for was not indifference, but "self-expression and acceptance," re-claiming both themselves and a city to which they "came or were brought to by [...] [their] own volition or out of necessity," as stated by Nael Ibrahim and Erkan Affan in a sort of founding manifesto for the collective.[28] While Mahmood is overwhelmed with his perceived otherness, negotiating whether to take it as an advantage or to try to loosen its grips on his body, the founders of *Queer Arab Barty* reclaim otherness for themselves and fight for visibility that can do justice to their desires and specificities, but without being ceaselessly rendered as an object of study, analysis, sensationalism, and commodification.[29]

For the collective, Arabness is marked by a common tongue, common visual references, and a scope of "various cultures and traditions." At the same time, by virtue of a shared experience of fetishization and racialization, queer Arabness remains thoroughly tied up with the struggles of other queer communities of color in the city.[30] The collective does not claim to conquer new grounds of representation but to shake the current grounds of framing Arabs with Orientalist legacies and fetishized desires. In fact, Arabs are prolifically represented, yet often subsumed in a "(fictious)

26 Michel Foucault (1978) The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Pantheon Books: 27.

27 Ibid.: 101.

28 Erkan Affan/Nael Ibrahim (2019) Too Arab to be Queer, and too Queer to be Arab. In: Jeem. July 7 (https://jeem.me/de/node/280).

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

binary of Arab versus queer'" that flattens their experience and prevents them "from feeling like (they) belong to the city."[31] As the title they chose, *Too Arab to be Queer, and too queer to be Arab*, expresses, the authors recast the binary in an attempt to subvert the paradox it entails. Subversion here is not merely about circumventing the conventional frame by blocking out certain realms from its scope, it is about *de-framing* it altogether.

In January 2020, I attended a public event organized by the collective titled *Navigating Orientalism in Contemporary Society*. The organizers invited a group of queer artists and activists from the Arab communities in Berlin to discuss "whether it is possible to subvert/reclaim racist iconographies and typologies."[32] As panel moderator and collective member Nael Ibrahim asserts, in place of the dichotomous discourse of (ir)reconcilability that posits queer as a pole opposite to Arab or Muslim, the panel deploys queerness as an attempt to break with the figurative formations of Arab and Muslim in Germany as identities that cohere through interrelated – though not necessarily homologous – perceptions: "the hyper-sexual," "the hypermasculine," "the terrorist," "the refugee," "the homophobe," or "the victim of homophobia." Two of the panelists, Ahmed, an Egyptian author and psychosociologist, and Hassan, a Lebanese artist and drag performer, noted how they had found themselves trapped in the category of the "Arab" which emerged ubiquitously as an unambiguous reference for their identity after they had come to Germany. For Imad, a Lebanese anthropologist, visual artist, and member of the collective, Arabness might be "a problematic term," but it bears an undeniable ontology. Arabness is marked by his skin, his body, his family, his war traumas, and his unredeemable losses. In Germany, it manifests continuously in his "lack of access to certain spaces and opportunities." Arabness might be a performance, but it is an "ongoing" one that transcends the language of choice and self-autonomy without fully circumventing agency. Imad "cannot not perform" his Arab identity, he says. Nevertheless, he thinks he can choose not "to capitalize" on this performance, which means not subscribing to dominant stereotypical imaginaries of Arabness. Precisely in resisting the latter does one claim authority for one's own performance.

For Tewa, a curator and artist, "Arabness" is both an emblem for personal identity crisis and a provoking notion. Growing up in an Amazigh family in Gaddafi's Libya, she had not been aware of her ethnic difference until when she was 14. Today, she is provoked when people – Arabs and non-Arabs – insist on labeling her an Arab. She

31 Ibid.

32 Queer Arab Barty, QAB x Vorspiel: Navigating Orientalism in Contemporary Society, on Facebook, Jan 28, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/events/524124901516142?ref=newsfeed. The speakers where Imad Gebrayel, Hassan Cupcake, (members of Arab Queer Barty) Ahmed Awadalla and Tewa Barnosa, and it was moderated by Nael Ibrahim (also a member of the collective).

is also provoked by the pressure of constantly having to deliver a statement against the attempts to Arabize her.

In these reflections, Arabness becomes a site of contestations, a domain in which a sense of disparity takes shape between the intricate ways of being and feeling like oneself on the one hand, and the established modes of outer perceptions, regimes of representations and invocations of speech and visibility on the other. The panelists acknowledge this disparity in different ways. But they also underline that conceiving of it in theory cannot make up for how confounding it is in reality. One's own feelings, desires, and ways of self-perceptions never stand aloof from how one is perceived by others, or how one is urged to perform Arabness in ways that feed and shade into prevalent hegemonic representations. Imad notes that Orientalist images are encouraged by Arabs themselves as much as they are constructed by them. He calls for creative ways to reclaim or repurpose such images if we are not able to entirely refrain from reproducing them. Imad in effect tries to translate this vision in his work as a designer and visual artist. He avoids taking up identity in terms of customary visual references and tries instead to understand it in terms of the topics he chooses to produce and how these are in turn shaped by what affects him as a queer migrant and a person of color in Europe, not just by where he comes from. Along the same lines, Ahmed endorses alternative identity mapping, stressing that if identity signifies anything at all, then not what one *is*, but what one *does*. The latter is in constant motion, not confined to a space or time. He adds that being a refugee is something he strongly identifies with, noting critically that the refugee cause has been predominantly represented in Germany in ways that distorted the complexities of refugee experience, often reducing them to "victims" of their countries of origin who must feel "grateful" for those who saved them.

In a similar vein, Hassan expresses his discomfort with the way he is being pushed to deal with certain themes in his shows. He feels pressured to restate "that Arabs are not violent, that they are peaceful, that they love music" and he feels uncomfortable always being read as a "political" performer. "Yes, drag is always political," Hassan concedes, but he refuses to endorse a vision that codes his drag art as political only in conjunction with certain references to or expressions of an imagined collective identity. Hassan complicates the "political" framing of his performances by referring to his personal life, to the people he dates, or to the neighborhood he grew up in specifically, rather than to Lebanon or the Arab world in general, as sources of inspirations that qualify as political in a different sense.

In this sense, political subjectivity unfolds not only beyond those realms of action and interaction presumed as political, but in the very act of challenging the power of defining certain actions as political when assigned to certain spaces and articulated in a certain vocabulary. In calling the personal and the particular into play as core references for being political, queer Arabs infringe the boundaries that outline their actions and the structures that hold together racialized configurations of their

identity. The personal and the particular as domains of politics, the diasporic here and now with all its contingencies as a realm of identification in opposition to assumed origins, concepts of identity that dwell on the multiplicity of deeds, words, and dispositions instead of the embeddedness into a culture, an ethnicity, or a religion, all of these can be read as subversive strategies to *de-frame* hegemonic images and perceptions about queer Arabs.

Yet, despite their empowering potential, such strategies remain indebted to the contextual relations that bring them forth, marked by doubt and ambivalence. Even when one consciously intervenes in the narrative "to show what is happening from our shores, not from their shores," as Tewa puts it, there are these moments of conflict: "Is that my voice now? Am I [still] giving them what they are expecting? Or am I voicing my own traumas and giving myself the chance to overcome them through [. . .] [uncovering] what is happening there in reality?"

The panel did not promise to deliver any answers to the questions it raised. But Ahmed's closing words offer us insights into how to handle the frame queerly; how to speak in a voice that can do justice to one's own experiences and struggles, regardless of the puzzling question of how one's "true" voice might sound. For that, he resorts to Edward Said's notion of "speaking truth to power."[33] He propels us to "engage in troubles," to "cause fraction," to "rub against things" in the sense of creating tensions that question power, that unsettle the framing of otherness and the paradigms of debating race, religion, and culture in Germany.

Epilogue: Bad Queers

Framing is a reasoning narrative; a way of organizing experiences in a manner that smoothly channels them into pre-established modes of sight and cognition. The frame directs sight and locates bodies within a field of vision as the only ground where their recognition becomes feasible. The frame is an episteme in which representation becomes, not merely a doorway to or an illustration of reality, but an order that aims to substitute reality by what it condenses and compresses from within a set of imagined outlines, reasoned as common sense, for whose coherence contingencies must be overlooked. Political theorist Timothy Mitchell speaks of "enframing" as "a method of dividing up and containing;"[34] an endeavor to reorganize the world so that it can resemble the very images and concepts through which it is envisioned and cognized. Following this line of thought, the frame can be understood in both senses; as a material interface, affixing bodies in a posture that

33 Edward Said (1994) Speaking Truth to Power. In: Representations of the Intellectual. London: Vintage: 73.

34 Timothy Mitchell (1988) Colonizing Egypt, London: Cambridge University Press: 44.

reproduces them as representations, images, and narratives, and as a scheme that re-organizes human experiences into clear-cut itineraries endowed with temporal dimensions and marked by totalizing concepts like religion and culture. Framing is also the process through which the conditions of recognition are set, and identity is assumed. The frame seizes and materializes how, in the Althusserian sense,[35] subjects are hailed into being and constituted as such in the very act of labeling them. To speak as a recognized subject is to respond to an authority that hails you as what you are; or rather as what you are assumed to be.

The current contribution tried to uncover how dominant patterns of framing the experience of queer Arab migrants in Germany sustain hierarchies and racialize difference. The problem with the (ir)reconcilability narrative that holds sway over their representation is not just a problem of rehabilitating binarity and essentializing identities. It also concerns the modes of control and regulation the narrative enables but never recognizes. It animates and masks particular styles of knowledge production as indispensable and unbiased despite being embedded in particular histories and configurations of power. It fails to reckon with diverse modes of desire, different ideas about love, justice, and concepts of the self that queer Arabs cherish and embrace, and the obfuscated forms of violence they are susceptible to in Berlin. The cases of Mahmood and the *Queer Arab Barty* collective were presented to demonstrate how queer Arabs migrants creatively engage with the workings of the frame and the firmness of its boundaries. They do acknowledge being complicit in maintaining its authority by responding to the hailing call as the price for social recognition;[36] it is the price they pay to become the free queer subject they are promised to be. At the same time, they master tacit maneuvers to keep themselves at distance from the discourse that bestows identity on them. They disrupt the structure of interpellation by refusing to respond to the hailing call – as in the case of Mahmood's silence about his Muslimness in conjecture with his homosexuality – or by hailing back and speaking truth to power, as Ahmed puts it. For Althusser, such provoking acts of dissonance would qualify its agents as "bad subjects", in contrast to a subordinate majority of "good" ones.[37] But "badness" in the face of normative authority is a precisely queer hallmark. "Badness"– like "strangeness"– is a quality the English word "queer" has semantically signified since the 16th century.[38] Today, the "bad" queer is the "shadow [that comes] in mind" when the image of the "good gay" is invoked, to use Michael

35 Louis Althusser (2014) On Ideology. In: On the Reproduction of Capitalism. Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus, Louis Althusser, author, trans. G. M. Goshgarian. London: Verso: 189–190.

36 Judith Butler (1997) The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 112.

37 Althusser (2014) On Ideology: 269.

38 Philip Durkin (2009) The Oxford Guide to Etymology. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 216f.

Warner's phrasing, without necessarily sticking to what that implies for him.[39] Being "bad" here is namely not only about knocking back from the attempts to institutionalize gay love through marriage and "building a way of life with other queers that ordinary folk do not understand or control."[40] What is at stake here is more about refusing to place oneself smoothly in a framework that claims to represent, liberate, and include without pointing to the conditions it decrees for its claims to resonate, and without attending to the hierarchies and forms of exclusion it deploys. "Bad" queers here are those who cannot arrive; those racialized subjects who cannot be "folded back into life,"[41] or "properly be gay."[42] But "badness" can be queerly reclaimed by a will to cause fraction, to "rub against things"- as Ahmed puts it – even against one's own body. Arabness might be marked on one's own body, but it still can be *queered* by questioning how it is framed, by whom, for whom, and under what conditions. It can even be undone, not out of endorsement for anti-identity politics, but for the sake of envisioning and enacting new possibilities of being and identifying as queer and Arab, outside of authoritative frames – since a critique of authority will only fully unfold when "the one who offers [it] is willing to be undone by the critique that he or she performs."[43]

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39 Michael Warner (1999) The Trouble with Normal. Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press: 114.

40 Ibid.

41 Jasbir. K Puar (2007) Terrorist Assemblages. Homonationalism in queer times. Durham: Duke University Press: 35.

42 El-Tayeb (2012) Gays who cannot properly be gay: 89.

43 Judith Butler (2004) Undoing Gender: 8.

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