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Noor Aldayeh April 10, 2023

Hayati / حياتي

My Life / My Love

A queer Middle Eastern and North African archive

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An abstract of
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Film and Media Department

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Abstract

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By Noor Aldayeh

Global discussions of intersectional issues pertaining to marginalized identities have without a doubt seen a rise in contemporary spaces, especially that of film and media, in regard to representation within the field. One particular group which has had little to no time in this spotlight, however, would be that of queer Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) individuals. In the few cases where this group is in fact discussed, it often tends to be a conversation centering the experiences of queer MENA men – still then operating in a framework outside of the patriarchy. At large, representation of the MENA region and their people in Western spaces (disregarding queerness) still suffers greatly from outdated, negative stereotypes and downright harmful ideologies that have perpetuated detrimental misinformation spreading to non-MENA audiences (see: Edward Said's Orientalism). MENA folks are still fighting to get any representation that doesn't depict our people and land as "backwards," therefore making the stride towards any more nuanced depictions seem incredibly out of reach.

The title of this work is the Arabic word 'Hayati.' In a literal sense, it translates to "My Life." Colloquially, it is used as a term of endearment – often used in the same context as you would in calling someone "my love." In this project, I will show the complexity of this double meaning which directly speaks to the nuanced identity and belonging represented within my body of work. I have created a photography exhibit solely featuring queer MENA women and gender non-conforming individuals living in America – in an attempt to bring forward a group that audiences have likely never seen explicitly before. This identity lies at the intersection of multiple marginalizations, tackling queerness, gendered dynamics, as well as ethnic struggles all as they pertain to one individual's experience. The goal of this project is, at its core, to show that people of this identity do in fact exist, and even further than that, deserve to be seen and talked about. The public record of individuals from this identity is abysmal and often difficult to access; queer Arab studies remains a field that is wildly niche and scarce in its resources. There is much progress to be made both in MENA and Western spaces, in the treatment of these individuals within our societies. It is my firm belief, however, that in order to have these conversations, we need to know about their existence first. This project aims to be an initiating catalyst in this necessary discussion.

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Lastly, I would be remiss not to extend my gratitude to all my friends and family who have made this work possible. I would like to extend a special thanks to Sierra Talbert for being my moral and physical support behind this thesis for most of its creation. Additionally, Ayusha, Twisha, Balwant, and Lennox for their endless support in my daily life as I created this work as well. I do everything I do for my father and brother: Louai and Rami Aldayeh.

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Global discussions of intersectional issues pertaining to marginalized identities have without a doubt seen a rise in contemporary spaces, especially that of film and media, in regard to representation within the field. One particular group which has had little to no time in this spotlight, however, would be queer Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) individuals. In the few cases where this group is in fact discussed, it often tends to be a conversation centering on the experiences of gay MENA men – still then operating in a framework deeply tied to the patriarchy. At large, representation of the MENA region and their people in Western spaces (disregarding queerness) still suffers greatly from outdated, negative stereotypes and downright harmful ideologies that have perpetuated detrimental misinformation spreading to non-MENA audiences. MENA folks are still fighting to get representation that doesn't depict our people and land as "backward," therefore making the stride towards any more nuanced depictions seem incredibly out of reach. As I have made my way through my academic career as a Film and Media student in particular, these stereotypes became more and more apparent. Perhaps more glaringly though, was the stark absence of discussion or representation in intersectional, or simply non-Western, depictions of MENA at all within foundational film courses. My mission quickly became one to amplify stories from our community while dispelling the crumbs of representation filled with stereotypical narratives and imagery with my own work, hoping to poke questions at why we are so often depicted in these ways. This does not at all discount the endless and countless amount of work being done and which has already been done by the MENA community in these spaces – to the contrary, it upsets me that so much of their work is not supported by larger production companies or funding. The foundation of our quality representation is actively being built, brick by brick, at this very moment. Given just how many structures work against MENA folks in western communities at large – it is understandable that there has not been as much work seen by the public. The fact that homophobia is so glaringly prevalent in both western and MENA spaces, makes the work a two-fold job for many. Seeing as this project was bound to the United States, those contradictory identities looking like: fighting against homophobia, sexism, and Islamophobia (regardless of one's actual faith) in the United States, while being actively scapegoated and attacked by our armies. Or in MENA communities, dealing with large amounts of homophobia from within the community, as well as being the scapegoats of the West while not receiving support from them, and of course, facing the direct harm of those military occupations.

The title of this work is the Arabic word 'Hayati.' In a literal sense, it translates to "My Life." Colloquially, it is used as a term of endearment – often used in the same context as you would in calling someone "my love." In this project, I illustrate the complexity of this double meaning, which speaks directly to the nuanced identity and belonging represented within my body of work. I have created a photography exhibit solely featuring queer MENA women and gender non-conforming individuals living in America – in an attempt to bring forward a group that audiences have likely never seen explicitly before. This identity lies at the intersection of multiple marginalizations, tackling queerness, gendered dynamics, as well as ethnic struggles all as they pertain to one individual's experience. The goal of this project is, at its core, to show that people of this identity do in fact exist, and even further than that, deserve to be seen and talked about. The

public record of these individuals is abysmal and often difficult to access. Queer Arab studies in academia remains a field that is quite niche and scarce in its resources. There is much progress to be made both in MENA and western spaces, in the treatment of these individuals within our societies. It is my firm belief, however, that in order to have these conversations, we need to know about their existence first. Hayati aims to be an initiating catalyst in this necessary discussion.

This project began when I went on the Internet in search of Queer Arab support groups. I was working on my initial proposal for this very Honors program, but it wasn't "Hayati" quite yet. I knew that I wanted to do a project that dealt with MENA women and photography – more specifically, something where I questioned the way in which we have been depicted in front of the camera (historically and in the present). The Internet search was purely personal – thinking of ideas for the proposal had made me reflect a lot on my own identity – and I realized that I felt very, very lonely in it. I was lucky enough to have made many queer friends up until that point, none of which shared my culture or understood the specific complexities that came with it, though. So, I Google'd. With an endless amount of information and people present on the Internet, I was confident that I would be able to find far more people like me out there – who I could talk to and relate with as I worked on my proposal. "Hayati" was born when, after hours and hours of searching for such a space, I came up with ultimately, nothing. Sure, there were some useful queer Arab groups of promise – but, all of them met in person only and were based in either San Francisco or New York City – neither of which I myself happened to live within at the time. When it came to online chatrooms, there were some anonymous sites, but those were all written in Arabic, and not as accessible to me as such. It also felt a bit impersonal to not know anyone to who I would be speaking to anyways, though I supported the anonymity as I knew it was a matter of safety for many of our community. Though I had already been following a few queer Arabs online: on TikTok, Instagram, or Twitter (anytime an algorithm worked in my favor), these were not people I knew personally or were in contact with.

All of a sudden, a simple moment of loneliness on my end opened up to me a far more sobering reality: everything might remain this way unless I did something about it. Then began a process of deeper research, where I began to wonder what, if any, previous photography projects focused *specifically* on queer MENA women and gender non-conforming individuals (GNC) looked like. In a soon-to-be familiar and saddening pattern, I found: ultimately, none. There were a few art projects dedicated to queer Arabs out there, which were absolutely spectacular; but they largely (again) would focus on gay men or drag queens as an "all-encompassing" look at the queer Arab experience. Any queer women or GNC I saw integrated into these works were rare, and in far less quantity than their male counterparts if present. That is when the decision to create a photographic archive solely dedicated to this intersection was made, as I truly was not sure if one did exist. My new question then became: how do I do this properly? In order to cover all of my bases, I feel it is important to set the scene of how MENA representation in the West stands in the current status quo. To do that, I shall introduce a handful of very foundational texts in the field of MENA Film and Media studies. While many of the resources within this paper are more dated, they still hold

huge amounts of relevancy today – a perhaps telling example of the state of this representation. Even more ironically, would be the fact that because there are so few sources for me to be able to reference in this thesis particularly, these dated works are largely what I have to work with, in general.

First, within this review, I would be remiss not to amplify Dr. Jack G. Shaheen's work *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001). Within this book, which was the "first comprehensive review of Arab screen images ever published," lies a 900 film breakdown of nearly every Hollywood depiction of Arab people on the silver screen (up until the year of the book's publication). From silent films of the 1940s all the way to more modern hits of the 1980s, 1990s, and – later in his documentary adaptation of the book – the early 2000s, Shaheen shows over and over again the persistent and relentless depictions of Arabs as villains, terrorists, barbarians, thieves, criminals, maidens, and nearly any other harmful individual one could be depicted as. Furthermore, Arab peoples at large are seen as backward, oppressed, and unevolved societies that are dangerous to the West and to some extent their own people (ex: Arab men to Arab women). What Shaheen ends up discovering within this meticulous and thorough review of Hollywood films is that, overwhelmingly, Arabs on the silver screen have been depicted in negative fashions, chock-full of stereotypical imagery, and racist, sexist, and violent anti-Arab sentiments. Furthermore and more importantly, it's not simply that this is a common trope amongst Arab characters, but as he explains: "I am not saying an Arab should never be portrayed as the villain. What I am saying is that almost all Hollywood depictions of Arabs are bad ones." (11). It has become more commonly known amongst audiences worldwide that having diversity on the screen which shows not only the vastness of the world's cultures but also the nuances within the people of those cultures, is important. However, it is interesting to note which groups have been allowed within those spaces, and furthermore, which few remain left out of the picture.

Again and again, modern films (as recent as ones released in 2022 itself – I'm thinking of Netflix's *Purple Hearts* in particular right now) consistently show "the Arab" and Arabs at large as violent villains to avoid and/or "fix." We rarely ever get to see a regular Arab family on screen, whether they be Western or not, in Hollywood filmmaking and TV. "And pay special attention to the Arabs who you do not see on movie screens. Missing from the vast majority of scenarios are images of ordinary Arab men, women and children, living ordinary lives." (13) It is precisely this phenomenon that emphasizes the importance of more nuanced Arab representation in film and media spaces. Not only do these depictions subvert those that precede them, but even more importantly, humanizes a group of peoples who are often not granted humanity in any sense. There have been newer, more realistic, MENA family depictions in film and media today – see shows like: *Ramy* (2019), *Mo* (2022), or *We Are Lady Parts* (2019) as examples (taking note that two out of three of those examples are made by the same person, who is male). But again, the numbers are so few and far between that it is largely a problem we are still facing in our representation.

One way in which Shaheen organizes his work is through a categorization of the 5 Arab character types: villains, sheiks, maidens, Egyptians, and Palestinians. (14) For the sake of my

thesis, the category which is most pressing to note for me would be that of the maidens. Here, Middle Eastern women and the homogenization of all Arab peoples as being Muslims and all Muslims as being Arabs on screen is really able to take hold, through the usage of the Veil. In stark contrast, we are also often depicted on the other end of the spectrum, as eroticized and mystic seductresses, scantily-clad belly dancers who are props and possessions of white and Arab men alike. More commonly and often than not, however, comes the "bundles of black" as is described by Shaheen. "By covering the reel Arab women in black and relegating her to silence, the costumer links her with oppression." Even further, the complete erasure and invisibility of Arab women's voices in film and media spaces are truly and quite literally stripped away from us. "Not only do Arab women never speak, but they are never in the workplace, functioning as doctors, or computer specialists, school teachers, print and broadcast journalists, or as successful, well-rounded electric or domestic engineers." (25) Ultimately and horrifyingly still truly nearly 20 years later, Arab women have still yet to have earned this kind of explicit representation. While the first steps towards positive Arab portrayals in film and media spaces have indeed improved since Shaheen's publishing of this book, it is sad to see just how much of it remains the same for Arab women in particular.

"You would never guess from Hollywood's portrayal of Arab women that they are as diverse and talented as any others." (25)

This book is absolutely necessary for understanding the history of Arab depictions in film within the West, especially within the context of how discrimination against Arab people is rationalized through mass media news coverage only centering worn-torn, beaten-down, oppressive government versions of the MENA. It serves as the basis of the state of the field and the people who I will be depicting from within that space and thus proves that this work is necessary and even more pressingly, uncommon. Something that is new, nuanced, and necessary. Incredibly excitingly, and which felt very full-circle to me personally, the majority of the funding I received for this project came from the Arab-American Anti-Discrimintation Committee's (ADC) Dr. Jack G. Shaheen Mass Communications Scholarship. The scholarship was created by Dr. Jack G. Shaheen and his wife Bernice Shaheen to continue his work of "dispelling damaging cultural images, offering insights drawn directly from awardees' heritage to bring out positive change." Though he, unfortunately, passed away before I got the chance to meet him, I would like to think that he would approve of this type of work if he were to see it now. It would not be possible without him.

Second up, and arguably equally as important as Shaheen's work, is of course no other than Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Published in 1973 and also one of the first of its kind, *Orientalism* sheds light on the somewhat invisible yet glaringly noticeable separation of the "West" and the

"East" also often known as the "Occident" and the "Orient." Said's work was absolutely revolutionary in bringing awareness to the ways in which the West and East view and depict each other, and more importantly how Western superiority over the "Other" / "East" – anything which deviated from the West – has fueled the negative depictions, education, and understanding of the "East" and their peoples. In the context of my own work, I am focused more so on the Middle Eastern and North African manifestations of orientalism than on other regions which fit into the umbrella of the "East." This is simply due to the fact that this is the particular culture that I will be depicting within my work, and thus that which I will feel more comfortable speaking about and on within the written aspects of my thesis. As explained by Said, Orientalism is somewhat of a framework and ideology in which we can place certain actions and belief systems, as well as something that can be used as its own practice and/or lens in that right. He elaborates, "it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political (as with a colonial or imperial establishment), power intellectual (as with reigning sciences like comparative linguistics or anatomy, or any of the modern policy sciences), power cultural as with orthodoxies an canons of taste texts. values), power moral (as with ideas about what "we" do and what "they" cannot do or understand as "we" do." (12) We can see here, and throughout the rest of this work, that Orientalism is a viewpoint in the West (the 'Occident') that has been able to use in order to convince themselves of a certain level of superiority in the human race. Furthermore, that framework, of "us vs. them" has been the basis of rationalizing harmful acts against people of the East – take for example United States' military occupation and intervention in Middle Eastern territories for the sake of their resources disguised as protecting their women, children, and gays, from a "big bad Arab enemy." Ultimately, Said's work can be seen as the first and most comprehensive understanding of Orientalism in this fashion, and one which serves to prove the significance and important influence that film and media have in the influencing of thoughts about the East. Thus, it not only serves as a concept of which I am constantly aware and cautious not to replicate (in terms of Orientalist viewings of the non-West) but also one which I hope to work in opposition with – by integrating post-Oriental photographic practices.

Keeping our sources in the MENA sphere, only this time focusing on the representation in mass media – especially that of broadcast news – we have *Middle East in the Media: Conflicts, Censorship, and Public Opinion* edited by Arnim Heinemann, Olfa Lamloum, and Anne Francoise Weber. This book does some of the most extensive and important research and writings in this sphere. It describes itself as being, "...a double balance: a balance of Western and Arab perspectives, as well as the balance of an approach, academic on one hand and journalistic on the other." (12) While this does not so much apply to my own artistic aesthetic or influences as a photographer, it does display and thus serves as the environment in which I will be entering in creating my exhibit.

The book itself is split into three sections (each with its own subsections) which are: 1) Media in Conflicts 2) Market Censorship and 3) Public Opinion. As I mentioned prior, these sections are largely explored in their relations to mass media, and how Western media chooses to represent the Middle East. It is not only interesting to note what is deemed as newsworthy and shareable with the West, but furthermore how these things are being depicted. When thinking about the ways in which Western society perceives the "East," more particularly that of the MENA region, a large majority of Western citizens' *only* exposure to these countries and their people is through mainstream media, more particularly, the news. When there are so many wars, political conflicts, and generally heartbreaking events occurring in these regions – and those are the *only* representation of these areas the West sees – the constant stereotyping of MENA as a war-torn, outdated, barbaric land, starts to have a lot more evidence supporting it than not. And when the only representation of the MENA and its people are ones centering war, sexism, homophobia, death, famine, pain, and human rights violations – it is no surprise to me the stereotypes and general consensus around Arabs and their characters are what they are.

Another incredibly important work to mention in this realm would be none other than Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* An anthropological work that takes form both in an academic article and more expanded upon in a book, this work is one of the more widely known texts about MENA & Muslim women in Western media and spaces. It does the great task of bringing forward the nuances that the West, more particularly white and non-Muslim audiences, very often lack in their discussions about Muslim women. More especially, it addresses and calls out the white saviorism and hypocrisy of these audiences, who often make out Muslim women as lacking any sense of autonomy or free will. Abu-Lughod was writing in a post-9/11 time period, hence having a lot of her arguments centered around the intense prejudice towards Muslims in the West, and Islamophobic notions that this religion is 1) enforced across all of MENA (mentioning explicitly Said's ideas of Orientalism) and 2) is oppressive to its women.

"Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which First Ladies give speeches versus others where women shuffle around silently in burqas."

This focus on the imagined oppression (to some extent, and acknowledging that the extremist Islamic Republic is indeed guilty of this) of hijabi women ends up creating just as problematic views of the sexism and discrimination that these feminists claim to be most concerned about. Abu-Lughod notes the ways in which the concept of "the Veil" and how it is viewed by those outside of Islam often as a form of oppression is actually one of the main reasons in which that the oversimplification of the multitude of issues Muslim women face as a result of their faith and gender. Because this veil is often the only form of "sexism" that white feminists employ when discussing sexism in Muslim countries, all of the actual harmful forms of discrimination and violence (domestic issues, war inflicted by the West in these countries, etc.) are never dealt with let alone addressed – leaving Muslim women to be viewed as helpless and

incapable. This is a source that I find to be integral to the gendered aspects of my thesis topic and the ways in which the nuance of intersectionality absolutely needs to be emphasized and discussed within my own work. The works of Shirin Neshat, Lalla Assia Essaydi, Shadi Ghadirian, Boushra Almutawakel, and many more were absolutely essential references to me in this realm. I looked to many of their varied projects for inspiration, whether in composition, concept, or overall impact. They provided the groundwork upon which I was able to build my own compositions and ideas – as I was able to see what it would look like to focus on MENA women in a way I felt did not exploit, eroticize, or invisibilize them. While they all dealt with many intersectional looks at the MENA women's experience and documentation – they were again still lacking another element which I wanted to be working with: queerness. Then came my delve into the world of Arab sexuality and its history – to see how I could meld that into the information, sources, and visuals I had gathered thus far.

I went to an Arab bookstore over the summer, where I bought every book that even hinted at an intersection of sexuality studies and MENA territories. While most of them were not very explicitly dealing with these concepts in a way that I felt held relevance to this particular work, I did get lucky with a few. A great introduction into the world of intersectional WGSS studies occurring within the Middle East and North Africa comes *Sexuality in the Arab World* edited by Samir Khalaf & John Gagnon. Published in 2006, this is the first book of its kind to focus on Arab sexuality as it manifests in MENA and is perceived by the West. The only book to do so before – which was centered on religion rather than ethnicity or regional culture – was *Sexuality in Islam* by Abdelwahab Bouhdiba. This book is an anthological work, containing fourteen essays each handling a different aspect of "sexuality in the Arab world" by different authors. Three of these essays are specifically about queerness, three are focused specifically on Arab women (in different ways), and almost all of the essays have at least one mention of either of the two. "Indeed, by providing further vivid and grounded evidence of the social construction of sexuality, we are in effect highlighting the adaptive strategies individuals and groups are resorting to in forging meaningful sexual identities." (33)

In this book, we see the early manifestations of queer studies within MENA; and anthropological studies of the ways in which queer communities, spaces, and ideas exist (or cease to) in the Middle East. Additionally, we see the ways in which Western manifestations of these same things – and even further of queerness in general (self-labels, queer culture, influencers in these spaces) – lack much of the nuance and background necessary for them to apply to a culture outside of themselves. "The integration of homosexual practices in Lebanon, however, forecloses the local existence of what could be termed a 'gay community,' if one perceives a community as being a somehow coherent and comprehending group of individuals who share corresponding, although at times competing convictions and aspirations, and where the sexual inclination becomes a fundamental concern regarding the many social convolutions of identity constructing." (200) This sense of a queer community, and the ways in which it can take form, is not able to apply to MENA in the same way it does the West. So, in these anthropological studies of queerness in

MENA, there lies a huge gap in the cultural contexts, applications, and manifestations of what queerness is in non-Western spaces. Given that context, a new question presents itself: "how can they [queer Arabs] celebrate or at least act on their difference without sacrificing their visibility?" (27) Furthermore, with phenomena like pinkwashing ever-pervading the lives of those who are queer and living in MENA, any forms of representation in western mass media likely only scapegoats them. Emory University's very own Sa'ed Atshan explains in his book *Queer Palestine and the Empire of Critique* ever so well how, "...beyond this, Western news outlets tend to feature queer Palestinians only when the context is highly sensational. Thus, some of the most devastating experiences with Palestinian homophobia are disproportionately amplified for Western audiences." (145)

Perhaps most pertinently to this thesis, Samar Habib's *Female Homosexuality In the Middle East: Histories and Representations* is the only academic book source to date I have found solely dedicated to the specific intersection of queer MENA women. Published in 2007, this is the most succinct scene-setter, source gatherer, and general discus-er of the identity I am representing – and just how invisibilized we are – even within the already niche field of queer MENA work. Her introduction reflects that "when one encounters material on the study of homosexuality in the Middle East, female homosexuality is treated, if at all, as some kind of secondary an unusual phenomenon." (3) While this book was incredibly essential to my work – and again the only text I could find regarding queer MENA women in particular – I was hit by a particular wave of melancholy upon reading it. I could not help but think about how this book is not many years away from being twenty years old – and is arguing so many points that I am writing about today. It was beautiful to read and made me feel seen in a way I never had before, which of course was a spectacular experience. She beautifully recounts the history of queerness in the region, honing in specifically on lesbians and trans individuals – explaining how the countless works by and for queer Arab women that existed for thousands of years were either purposefully not continually recorded as time went on or actively destroyed after a certain point in history – not at all that they have not or do not exist in plenty. This still does not so much dispel my own reflections of the lack of archival works of queer MENA women that are accessible to the general public – though Habib's book does have the most detailed and comprehensive references of literature, art, and film references by, about, and for the identity that I could find in my research thus far.

"While it is easy to establish a firm case for exclusive homosexual relationships in a case study of male Arab homosexualities, doing the same for women is virtually uncharted. Unlike the perceptions of the few who have dappled in the territory, the field is by no means arid, and the evidence is not entirely invisible, or even scarce. In fact, the period between the ninth century and the mid-thirteenth century is unusually littered with references to female homosexuality. The early writings are concerned with possible causes of homosexuality while the latter ones are more invested in religious condemnation. There is a clear shift in rhetoric from tolerance and medical inquiry to an obvious disdain and prohibition of these substantial references." (65)

I think it is incredibly important to emphasize the aspect of accessibility to resources when it comes to queer MENA women and GNC representation. While Habib's book is revolutionary, I myself, in my privileged position of being a middle-class student actively in higher education, would still have otherwise not been able to afford this book on my own accord – and was only able to gain access to it due to my university's library. Its paperback version (as of March of this year) costs a little over $60 and its hardcover copy exceeds $150 – an incredibly high cost for a single book for many folks in the general public. While public libraries do exist, the niche nature of queer MENA studies and the sheer amount of structures we have pitted against us does not ensure that this book will be in all of those libraries. Taking into account the current political climate in the United States – where government officials are actively proposing and passing bills discriminating against the queer community (most especially trans individuals), talks of banning books in schools, as well as the diminishing of intersectional studies of any kind in our educational systems (including higher education) – makes this point all the more pressing. It is not enough to have one book from nearly two decades ago be one of the few, if only, places to access stories and sources about queer MENA women. Hell, even within my initial Google source that sparked this project, Habib's book did not turn up in my results until I started to use specific key library search terms – which I again, only know how to use through the privilege I have as a college student who was taught how to do soin my schooling. It is incredibly unfair to queer MENA women and GNC around the world, to have this information be so out of reach for most of us; to expect us to transform into scholars of interdisciplinary fields in order to receive any information about our own identity. Essentially, the only way to get this information is in active, auto-archival pursuit of it – which not everyone is able to do. Most of my project participants had either done it themselves in their own way, scattered from each other, or been discouraged from pursuing it due to its difficulty. This is not at all to put any blame on Habib herself, as this is something she does not have control over nor owe anybody. Nor is this to argue that this particular case of an accessibility issue is not true for many identities in academia today. But, I do think it is fair to acknowledge that the extremity of these realities is especially emphasized in this particular intersection of identity. One high enough that simple Google searches can not solve – a level of inaccessibility that many can not fathom in the modern day.

Taking in all of this, I began to formulate my ideas for the archive. I knew almost immediately that it would take shape in the form of an exhibit – a brazen display of queer MENA women and GNC to the public. Though I did not finalize its format until months later, I had come up with the format being that of "double-sided" photographs – two pictures placed back to back. I started to think about all of the sources I had read so far – and how I could capture these individuals' lives in a meaningful way. The protection of my participants' safety was something I was immediately heavily concerned with throughout the beginning stages of planning my work. Initially, I envisioned the exhibit being made up of two types of individuals: those who are explicitly out, and those who were not. Turns out, it's kind of hard to find people who are not explicitly out if you don't already know who they are. And given the fact that this project was born out of the fact that I quite literally did not know any other queer Arab women or gender non-

conforming individuals in my own life, that clearly was something I lacked personally. So, I would like to one day see what Hayati would look like with anonymous (in this usage, I would use this word to mean obscuring the participants' faces or recognizable bodies) portraiture integrated throughout it; though this iteration of the project did shift to mostly feature those who are willing to be seen by a camera lens. Interestingly, I did indeed have one participant who chose to remain anonymous, however, not by not being seen. Rather, she asked simply for her name not to be included anywhere alongside the pictures of her I took.

While scholarship in queer MENA studies is an ever-present influence throughout my work – I am indeed a film and media student at the end of the day. It was important for me to read and include sources dedicated to intersectional photography in this dissertation. In our first non-text-centered source, we have a photography book entitled *Lebanon Shot Twice* by Zaven Kouyoumdjian. In this book, Kouyoumdjian meticulously re-photographs images that were made in Lebanon prior to the civil war, and tells the tales of the people, places, and things that occupy those spaces now (when they were re-shot). In an absolutely beautiful spread, we are able to see visually and read through supporting text, how one is able to capture the lives of those within the Middle East in an auto-ethnographic fashion that educates, humanizes, and brings to life their environments. This source is important to my project for a plethora of reasons, on one end, in its techniques and constructions, and on another, in its more conceptual and emotionally based foundations as well. When I had initially decided on the composition of the photographs being double-sided within my thesis, this book became even more integral to inspiring my work than I originally anticipated. I ended up using a very similar practice within my photography, where I made two photos of the same environment with a significant difference between them. Though it was in a largely different manner than the book specifically in that this was not a "re-photographing" of the same perspective, but rather a real-time environment change, with a stark visual distinction between the two photographs. This book served as a great visual and conceptual reference for me in its manifestations – as it directly demonstrates the ways in which a dual nature of MENA photography could be illustrated. I enjoyed returning to the pages when deciding how to pair my final twelve photos together.

Continuing in the world of photography-related texts, I now bring us over to *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography* edited by Carol Squires. This leads our review away from the more MENA and culturally focused sources onto the land of photography studies, the examination of photographic practices from multiple lenses of critique, as well as representation in photography (in a more general sense) from multiple varied perspectives. This book is a collection of essays by fifteen prominent photographers, film theorists, and individuals from the industry who each bring with them a different critical viewpoint and understanding of the use of photography within our world today. Within these fifteen authors includes the likes of Kathy Myers and Christian Metz, in addition to wildly talented and revolutionary thinkers in the world of the image, still and moving. "The goal of this book is to bring together writings on contemporary practice in photography that address a number of issues, from why certain photographic images

are made, and to what ends they are put by those who commission them, to the way that feminist theory is being re-thought in relation to woman-as-viewer." (11)

Given that there are so many writers contributing to this book, all of whom are covering separate ideas, there were a few essays that were perhaps more suited to the contributions toward my thesis. More particularly, the works of Griselda Pollock, Carole Vance, and Simon Watney – all of whom write from the lens of Womens, Gender, and Sexuality Studies as they apply to certain photographic practices. Vance's Essay, *The Pleasure of Looking*, dives into the legal court cases of the Attorney General's Commission on pornography. My thesis will not at all be focused on sexual or pornographic imagery, nor the interpretations of pornography that are analyzed from this court case, however, I do think that it is incredibly important to note the phenomenon described by Vance as an aspect of my thesis in certain ways. At the end of the day, though queerness does not at all equate to sexual promiscuity or acts, it is an aspect of identity that very often involves sexuality and thus has overlapping aspects with sex-related things. Additionally and more especially, this essay aims to look at this court case from the lens of how visual images were meticulously curated and manipulated in order to perpetuate right-wing ideologies – something which has been and is continually done with queer individuals. Both in the West and the Middle East, homophobic rhetoric maintains the idea that queerness is interchangeable with the sexualization of people and thus argues that exposure to any queer education, individuals, or pride, is a danger to children and vulnerable people everywhere. Queer folks are repeatedly villainized and, ironically, sexualized by the right, who will often use visual images associated with queerness as their ammunition.

In the same way that visual imagery can expose people to things they have never seen before, the idea and implication of that exposure is something that can be used to steer them away from ever seeing them. With homosexuality being an illegal activity in much of the MENA region, I think it was especially important to consider the ways in which this court case applies to my thesis in its framing of how photography in particular is a wildly powerful tool – legally, in societal life, and especially in our individual perceptions of the world. It was after this reading that I began to come up with the idea of where I should photograph my participants, and formulate the integration of the title with its visual representation. As I was reflecting on queer lives and queer love – I began to reflect on just how many words for "love" exist in Arabic. "Hayati" felt like the perfect embodiment of what I wanted to capture in this archive: the lives, and loves (not necessarily meaning a queer relationship) of people like us. Because of the homophobia and general discrimination we face in the public eye – I came up with the idea to photograph my participants within their safe spaces. To me, it felt like an authentic way to see the real lives of these people, while they were in control of what was being captured. The spaces in which they are able to take up the most space as they are fully, while remaining comfortable.

The intimacy of the photos, both with and without the individual in them, is impossible to ignore. Being able to see not only that these people exist, but exist in very real spaces, all around us, is a feeling that I hope this composition will really be able to amplify for audiences who see it.

Additionally, the dual nature of this form matches the nuanced nature of the identities featured – and furthermore, the "double" identity that we as queer Arabs often have to take on – choosing between appealing to the people from our culture or those who understand our queerness. Because the photos will be placed back to back in the exhibit space, they will never be able to be viewed simultaneously – aiming to re-create that feeling of back and forth-ness by making the audience do that movement physically. Especially given the fact that I traveled to their unique safe spaces for this work, the diversity of their experiences – and their locations – were emphasized. I attempted to integrate practices of "queer"ing my photography – as I was actively shooting; and most especially in my final choices to feature in the exhibit. In the first iteration of this work, six individuals of this identity from around the United States – from The Bay Area to Nebraska all the way to New York City – shared with me their safe spaces and stories. Though their ages, locations, and lives all are unique in spectacular ways – the similarities possessed via our identity was an energy that became more and more palpable as this work progressed.

So now, to introduce you to the first six individuals of Hayati:

1. Zaynab Kouatli; Wayne, NE; Syrian, nonbinary, lesbian,

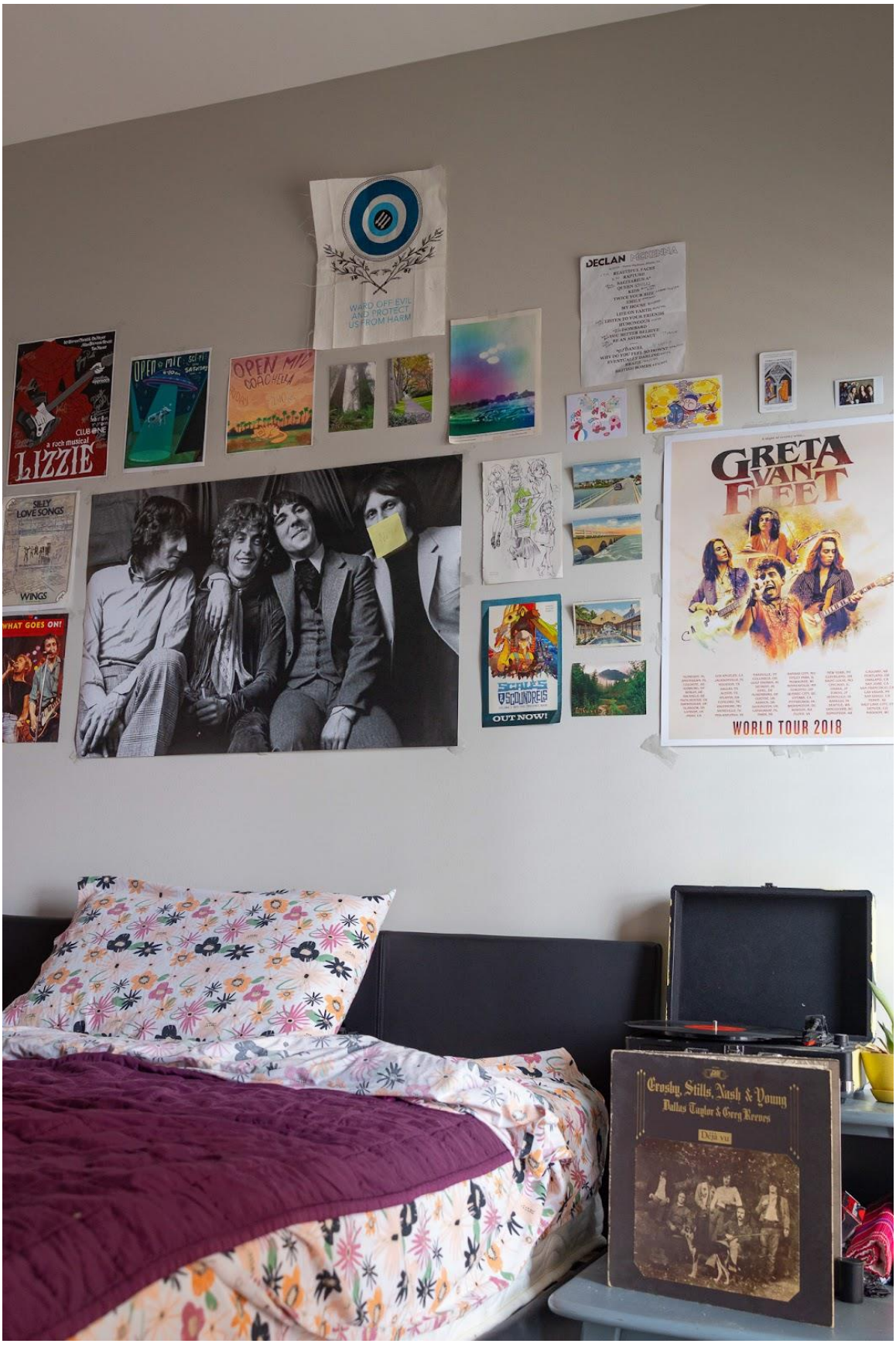

BLUE RIDGE
PARKWAY

2. Huda Judallah; Oakland, CA; Palestinian, lesbian

3. Rand Jitan; Upstate, NY; Palestinian, lesbian


Leila
& Rand
5·6·22

4. Carla Haddad; Savannah, GA; Syrian, asexual, aromantic


WARD OFF EVIL
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COACHELLA
SILLY
LOVE SONGS
WINGS
WHAT GOES ON!
SCHUSS
SCHLUNDREIS
OUT NOW!
GRETA
VAN
FLEET
WORLD TOUR 2018
Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young
Dallas Taylor & Greg Reeves
Déjà vu

5. Mona Eltahawy; Harlem, NY; Egyptian, polysexual, bisexual

6. Unnamed Participant; Atlanta, GA; Palestinian, queer


VISIT
PALESTINE

While I was actively researching for this very project, a first-of-its-kind queer MENA work was released. *This Arab is Queer* edited by Elias Jahshan is an anthology of eighteen queer Arab writers and their lived experiences as Queer Arabs which was published in early October of 2022. While it is not necessarily an academic read, in that it is not theory or something akin to it, this book is one of the only of its kind within my sources, and thus one which I think carries as much (if not, more) weight than its academia counterparts. It does within its pages what I hope to do with my photographs: actively carve out, and write in permanent marker, the stories of queer Arabs and their lives. It states clearly the complexities of the individuals who make up this identity, and just how tumultuous of a role it can be to be someone of these intersections. From stories about their first loves to the homophobia they faced after coming out to their communities, to coming to terms with and discovering their queerness, and beyond, this book is one that would speak to anyone who knows of the queer experience in some way. Having it grounded particularly in Arab culture and experience, however, makes this book so special compared to the other queer theory I will be working and speaking within my work. Most excitingly, the author of the very first essay featured in the book – Mona Elathawy – was willing to be a part of Hayati as a participant.

At every turn, the people featured in this work shared with me their stories in a way that took me more aback the further I got into my travels. Whether it be the trinkets in their home, their friends and family in their communities, meals we shared at their favorite restaurants, or stories of trauma that I myself would find unimaginable to have the bravery to share with others (let alone somebody who you only knew for a handful of days). At every turn, I not only was noting just how brave and honest, and vulnerable, these project participants were being – but even more so just how much they were excited to do excatly that. For so long, we have not had people who were dedicated to telling our stories in this way. whether it was Zaynab at the very beginning of their twentities, or Huda in her mid-50s, these participants seemed so ecstatic to hear about a project which is featured solely around people of this identity.Two out of the six participants in this project were referenced by other participants in this project, as direct inspirations or representations of themselves in media. The fact that I was able to get those two people to be in this work, perhaps shed light on just how little representation there is out there. However, it does make for an incredibly promising starting point upon which we can continue forward from.

Zaynab Kouatli is a spectacular artist and mind – set to teach art education to children and make an everlasting impact on our youth via intersectional learning and create their own fair share of important works themselves. Their work is so bold, colorful, and passionate – a clear reflection of the person creating it. Huda Jadallah was the first creator of a Queer Arab support group in the United States, but also one of the most prominent activists in the queer community in 1980s California. She was part of the first wave of legal gay marriages to occur in the United States and a wife and mother to three children. Carla Haddad is making original art of fantasy worlds in addition to stylized versions of real artists & environments. Blending the fantastical and her heritage, in comic strips and stories that quite literally any person would find absolute joy within.

Rand Jitan is countless individuals' first queer Arab account that they see and follow on TikTok – a fact that was proved to me time and time again by many people I met on this trip – whether they were project participants or individuals who I met while traveling. She educates audiences around the world about Palestine, general world news, and queer Arabs – and is also just a damn hilarious and loving presence who shares her love with all. The unnamed project participant is an attorney for immigrants and helps them safely get into the United States; she specifically works with Muslims and POC and integrates her own Islamic practice and culture to help them feel safer as they navigate such a debilitating process. Mona Eltahawy is the reason that thousands of women and girls around the world have discovered and become attuned to their sexuality, queerness included or not. She was featured in *This Arab is Queer* – but more than that; consistently shares with the world her wisdom, vulnerability, insight, and knowledge on all things bad-ass. These individuals' impact on the world goes far further than just queer Arab women and gender, non-conforming individuals – it's an impact on our existence at large.

Why are there not dozens of galleries dedicated to people like this already in the world? Why is it that Noor of a year ago, who went in search of people just like the six featured in this very work, more easily found information about gay tourist cruising in MENA territories than stories and images like theirs? I know that I am not at all the first person to document this particular group of people, but given the disenfranchisement that we have faced for so long, it very well might be the first accessible version of this specific type of photographic work. Any trace of us that has been made in the past is either so hard to access today, that most of us will never be able to see it, or has actively been destroyed by those who don't want us to be seen anyways. This project might be the first step, but I know that this is an endless journey that many of us are embarking on together. I am now moving forward with: my life, my love, and six new life long connections I will never forget.

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