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A Note from the Editors:

The papers presented in this year’s edition of Zaytoon shed light on an array of topics that engage in innovative ways with the 2015 conference theme of *Spatial and Temporal Imaginaries: Transcending Power, Identity and Body*. The authors envision new paths of scholarly inquiry for Middle East and North Africa area studies by traversing theoretical and empirical territories of knowledge from the early modern Ottoman Empire to contemporary Cairo. Whether it is through unearthing hidden histories of sexuality or confronting the monstrosity of an abject self, the following corpus of work contests established intellectual currents and attests to the growing strength of interdisciplinary scholarship and a promising future generation of research on the MENA region.

Sincerely,

Brittany Haynes
Atacan Atakan
Zaytoon Co-Editors
Bodies and Sexuality-Assemblage:
Considering Sexuality Beyond Identity

Kristyn Johnson
M.A. Candidate
Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Georgia State University

Abstract

Sexuality-assemblage is a theoretical framework that can be used to explore the ways in which sexuality is both fluid and codified. Through an understanding of assemblage and its molar and molecular lines and flows, sexuality-assemblage becomes one way to consider the potential of sexuality, sexual experiences, and sexual habits. The sexual representations in Seba al-Herz’s Saudi Arabian novel The Others span various kinds of sexual identification and experience. Through literary analysis and use of sexuality-assemblage, I argue that through the Narrator’s sexual experiences, The Others offers a kind of sexual expression that opens up possibilities of de-territorializing and re-territorializing sexual experience beyond static identity labels.

Key Words: Sexuality, Assemblage, Same-gender Desire, Lesbian, Saudi Arabia.

Introduction.

Sexual identity has become a significant part of how we think about and talk about who we are and the ways we behave in the world. Like race, or gender, or class, or age, sexuality is a piece of the self-puzzle we pull in that is integral to the big picture of ‘Me.’ It is a box we check off on forms, a label we pick on dating sites, a question we answer in social circles. But should it be? We have been taught that who we are sexually intimate with informs who we are as individuals, but does it? Is sexual identity just who we are? Is it something we do? Is it both?

Through my investigation of sexuality-assemblage, I want to begin to work through these questions and think about the ways in which sexuality may be something more than a box on a form. Sexuality, as explored and expressed through
the affective approach of assemblage may in fact be more concerned with what a body, indeed a sexy body, can do and less concerned with what a body is (or thinks it is). I am most interested in looking at the ways sexuality may be navigated as not solely an internalized or signified identity. Rather, sexuality may be expressed as practices, or a series of relations, that change depending on the environment, partners, and present potentials. Through my investigation, I use Seba al-Herz’s Saudi Arabian novel *The Others* as a place to explore the possible uses of sexuality-assemblage itself.

**Analyzing and Exploring Sexuality-Assemblage.**

To understand the ways in which sexuality-assemblage functions in the novel, and how sexuality-assemblage may open possibilities for sexual experiences undetermined by identitarian parameters, it is important to first examine assemblages more broadly. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1980) were among the first to discuss the idea of assemblage, and Paul Patton (1994) in his article “Metamorpho-Logic: Bodies and Powers in *A Thousand Plateaus*” offers a helpful breakdown of Deleuze and Guattari’s arguments. During an analysis and explanation of Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of assemblages in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*, Patton describes an assemblage as “a multiplicity of heterogeneous objects, whose unity comes solely from the fact that these items function together, that they ‘work’ together as a functional entity.”

Assemblages have a specific relationship to bodily territorializations, where “on the one hand, there is the constitution of a territory, a movement of reterritorialisation. On the other hand, there is always a movement of deterриториationalisation. On the other hand, there is always a movement of deterриториationalisation, a line of flight along which the assemblage breaks down or

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becomes transformed into something else.”² Which is to say, an assemblage is a temporary coming together of disparate objects and bodies that work together in a given event and which are constantly then being broken apart and de- or reterritorialized into new assemblages.

One of the most beneficial components of assemblage is its open-ended and rhizomatic potential. Patton explains that rhizomes are “flat, open-ended multiplicities defined only by thresholds beyond which an increase of dimensions will involve a change in the nature of the system as a whole.”³ In her feminist examination of Deleuze and Guattari, Elizabeth Grosz (1993) similarly describes the rhizome as “an underground – but perfectly manifest – network of multiple branching roots and shoots, with no central axis, no unified point of origin and no given direction of growth.”⁴ The rhizomatic nature of the assemblage is crucial to its usefulness, since the flat, open-ended structuring means there are no hierarchical levels, fixed lines of progression, or central starting points. All bodies within the assemblage exist in a flat relation to each other, moving together and apart in unencumbered directions. The significance of any assemblage as it comes together, then, is not found in what it means that these parts have assembled for the event, but rather what the parts do during that event.

The potentiality of sexuality-assemblage, then, comes from what Deleuze and Guattari name as the vertical axis of the assemblage: molecular and molar assemblages. Molecular assemblages are characterized as “fluid lines which map processes of becoming, change, movement, reorganization.”⁵ Molecular assemblages are fully open to all possible potentials, where the deterritorializing of bodies (any

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² Patton, 158.
³ Patton, 157.
⁵ Grosz, 176.
kinds of bodies) is never prescribed but is always in a state of becoming. Molar assemblages, by contrast, are distinguished by “the line that divides, orders, hierarchizes and regulates social relations through binary codes.” Molar assemblages function on the level of how individuals are organized and signified in the world, creating identities, understanding social relations, constructing cultural norms, and so on. Although molecular and molar assemblages seem antithetical, Deleuze and Guattari argue that they are both along the same vertical axis, as “becomings are always molecular, traversing and realigning molar ‘unities.’”

Sexuality-assemblages similarly come together through molecular and molar formations. Nick Fox and Pam Alldred (2013), in their discussion of sexuality-assemblages, explain that sexuality through a molecular assemblage “refers to the deterritorializing, nomadic and rhizomic flow of affect between and around bodies and other relations, a socially productive flow.” When sexuality is removed from an identitarian framing (where sexuality is a part of a stable self), a sexuality-assemblage manifested along molecular flows holds no preconceived notions of how sexuality, a sexual body, or a sexual encounter may move and engage. A molecular sexuality-assemblage is, then, an open flow of intensities and energies around and across sexual bodies.

The manifestations of molar sexuality-assemblages are described as assemblages where, “the rhizomic flow of affect is continuously subject to restrictions and blockages, often produced by molar, aggregating affects that codify, categorize and organize. Thus, territorialized, sexuality loses its nomadic character, channeling

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6 Grosz, 176.
7 Grosz, 176.
desire into a relatively narrow range of sexual capacities.” Instead of the sexuality-assemblage being open to all possibilities, the assemblage begins to be territorialized in a very particular way. An assemblage still exists, as various parts and bodies, such as memories, sensations, physical interactions, social norms, and so on, are coming together. However, in a molar assemblage, or a molar sexuality-assemblage, the reterritorialization occurs in ways that involve signification of the assemblage and its attendant parts. Sexuality is largely experienced through these more structured forms of molar sexuality-assemblages, which in turn inform and create ideas about sexual identity categories.

If molar sexuality-assemblages seek to codify assemblage relational components into organized and signified pieces, then a result of this codification is the formation of habits and patterns. If over a series of encounters and events, the sexuality-assemblage is continually signified as a particular kind of sexual identity, then a set of habits is created which limits the potential of future sexuality-assemblages. Jasbir Puar (2013) discusses the way sexuality becomes habit in her article “Homonationalism As Assemblage: Viral Travels, Affective Sexualities.” Puar argues that:

we can think of (sexual) identity, and our attachments to identity, as a process involving an intensification of habituation. That is to say, identity is the intensification of bodily habit, a ‘returning forward’ of the body’s quotidian affective sensorial rhythms and vibrations to a disciplinary model of the subject…. [and] entails a certain stoppage of where the body once was to reconcile where the body must go.  

In this way, sexuality once expressed as nomadic molecular assemblage becomes reduced to a finite set of possibilities that must fall within the codification of sexual identities. Intensities, relations, and sensations, Puar claims, are forced to “

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9 Fox and Alldred, 776.
“sense’ to submit to these master scripts either as a backformation responding to multiplicity or as a demand to subsume it to the master script and foreclose that multiplicity.”

Within such habituations of sexuality, all potentials and multiplicities of the molecular sexuality-assemblage are narrowed to “submit” to the master scripts of sexuality-as-identity that include political and societal demands.

**Sexuality-Assemblage in Action.**

With these various formations of sexuality-assemblage in mind, I want to consider sexuality-assemblage itself and look at what a sexuality-assemblage may look like. Fox and Alldred include the following example:

A’s lips – B’s lips.
While the affects within this assemblage are in part physical … the flow of affect may link the physical event (the kiss) to many other relations: personal and cultural contexts; past events, memories and experiences; codes of conduct and so forth. So a kissing-assemblage is typically far more complex, and could comprise (at least):
A’s lips – B’s lips – past experiences and circumstance – social and sexual norms – A and B’s personal attributes (e.g. physical appearance, personality, job) – dating conventions – immediate material contexts.

In this example, the sexuality-assemblage materializes through various bodies of human contact, human parts, memories, social contexts, economic relations, and so on, such that the assemblage goes far beyond just the two individuals in the moment. If functioning as a molar sexuality-assemblage, A and B within the assemblage would be reterritorialized to fit the signification of their sexuality as habit or identity. From a molecular sexuality-assemblage formation however, A and B’s deterritorialization in the sexuality-assemblage would be open to all possible relations or potentials.

We can also look at three examples from Seba al-Herz’s novel, *The Others.*

The first example involves a scene with the Narrator (a 22 year old female university student).

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12 Fox and Allred, 775.
student in Qatif) and Dai (a fellow female student with whom the Narrator has a long romantic and sexual relationship). In the passage, they are riding the bus home from the university and are in the middle of a fight. The Narrator describes:

An eye to the window and an eye on Dai, and I was split between two opposing longings: one, that the bus would swallow us up into a trip that would never end, where we would have no chance of arriving, even late; or, that the bus would fling me out exactly at my front door. I craved the possibility of our bodies touching, of her fingertip engraving something onto the palm of my hand, either by pure coincidence or intentionally.13

In this moment, the Narrator is enfolded into an assemblage of disparate parts that create an affective moment of potential. The Narrator, Dai, the bus, infinite time, the Narrator’s emotions of confusion and longing, fingers, and hands all come together temporarily in an assemblage with multiple possible outcomes: the Narrator might stay on the bus, might touch Dai’s hand, might scream at her, and so on. The encounter might be reterritorialized to fit social and sexual norms, constituting her under habits of sexual identity. Or it might detrerritorialize toward any of the multiplicitous potentials in the moment. The meaning within the assemblage and eventual outcome of the assembled moment are secondary to how the various bodies manifest and work together during the assemblage.

A similar example is when Dai and the Narrator attend a party with other women, some of whom are in female same-gendered relationships. The party is held at a woman’s home, and some of the events take place around the home’s pool. As dinner finishes and the women begin to swim in the pool, the Narrator says of the scene that “the air was electric: laughter and splashing, little tricks and transient touches. And I was fully charged, the tension flooding through me, too strong to dam up. Even the water could not drink it out of me. I had never before attended a

gathering like this and so I had no idea what might happen. My expectations were flung as wide open as could be....

The encounter assembles with the pool, the Narrator, the other women, the sounds of laughter and splashing, and the energy of the atmosphere. All of the bodies become full participants in the assemblage: the air holds an energy, the water in the pool can “not drink” the charge from her, and the circulating energy feels physical and tangible. Again, the resulting outcomes within the assemblage are less significant than how these bodies work together in the encounter itself. Indeed, the Narrator remarks at the end on how “wide open” the possibilities and outcomes of the moment are.

A third passage involves the Narrator and Rayyan (a 25 year old man who lives in Riyadh). The Narrator’s relationship with Rayyan is especially helpful in considering assemblages in the novel. Given that their relationship is a long-distance one, the ways in which they meet up, communicate, and even have sex are all mediated through various kinds of mediums. Rayyan frequently remarks on how their knowledge of what the other looks, smells, feels, or sounds like is all filtered through mechanisms of space, time, and technology. As Rayyan describes, “I have actually smelled that perfume you wear, Le premier jour, but I don’t know what its fragrance becomes when it is on your skin…. You have my pictures but you would not know my features without a square of glossy paper and a camera flash. You have my voice but you wouldn’t know what I sound like when my voice is not traveling through a medium.”

Thus, the dynamics of their relationship and all the connections that they share are always formed through technology and machines. As a result, their encounters manifest through assemblages that include bodies that are more than just humans.

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14 al-Herz, 142.
When dealing with assemblage, bodies are more than just individual humans. Patton states Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of bodies as:

an abstract conception of bodies of all kinds, one which does not discriminate between animate and inanimate bodies, individual or collective bodies, biological or social bodies: “A body can be anything; it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity”. What makes a given arrangement of parts into a body is precisely their co-operation.\(^\text{16}\)

Thinking about a body in a Deleuze-Guatarrian way, a body becomes de-centered from merely a human subject to being an open-ended “arrangement of parts” that become a body by their relational capacities and interactions with other bodies.\(^\text{17}\) By de-centering the body as only human such that any set of relational parts can be a body, then the human-as-exclusive-body is also de-centered within the assemblage, making the assemblage open to any and all various forms of bodies as well. Jasbir Puar (2011) similarly explains that “Assemblages do not privilege bodies as human, nor as residing within a human/animal binary. Along with a de-exceptionalizing of human bodies, multiple forms of matter can be bodies – bodies of water, cities, institutions, and so on.”\(^\text{18}\)

From this analytical angle where anything can be a body, Rayyan and the Narrator’s sexual encounters become an assemblage of their human bodies, their phones or computers, the typing keys, their fingers, and so on. Beyond that, their sexual encounters may form in sexuality-assemblage moments that also include things like the spatial distance of their separation, where they are in their different locations during sex, what they are sitting or laying on, and so on. Indeed, any item, space, and sensation can be folded into their sex under the assemblage concept. Similar to the

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\(^{16}\) Patton, 158.
\(^{17}\) Patton, 158.
\(^{18}\) Jasbir Puar, “‘I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess:’ Intersectionality, Assemblage, and Affective Politics,” *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (Jan 2011), paragraph 14.
Narrator’s encounters with Dai, the Narrator’s various encounters with Rayyan are mediated by molar and molecular sexuality-assemblage potentials. While an encounter might begin as a molar sexuality-assemblage, fitted into the parameters of social norms or habit or some other kind of signification, there is also the potential for the assemblage to deterritorialize into other open-ended and rhizomatic potentials that are un-gridded. Although these examples are from a work of fiction, they are still beneficial to thinking through sexuality in the world, given that they represent sexual moments that could and do occur in real life.

**Conclusion.**

The undetermined potential of sexuality-assemblage is, I would argue, what makes it a productive way of thinking about sexual identity and sexual practices. Sexuality-assemblage, through its rhizomatic and multiplicitous relations, makes sexuality open to greater potentials than a mere sexual identity might allow. As Jasbir Puar (2005) states in her article “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” “displacing queerness as an identity or modality that is visibly, audibly, legibly, or tangibly evident, assemblages allow us to attune to intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities.”

Although Puar is discussing queerness-as-identity specifically in her quote, the argument is equally related to thinking about sexuality-as-identity more generally. Indeed, the usefulness of sexuality-assemblage is found in the ways that assemblage investigates more than just what is readily seen, heard, or touched. The sexuality-assemblage encourages us to focus not on what a sexy body is, but what a sexy body can do.

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The usefulness of thinking through an alternative to sexual identity is that it broadens the ways that people may interact and form bonds with one another. If an intimate bond with someone, a relationship, or a sexual encounter does not have to always mark out something specific about who you are, then the ways that we engage with each other in the world can be more expansive and less defined by parameters that seek to dictate what is and is not allowed within sexual couplings and intimate spaces. While a sexual identity is beneficial and liberating for some individuals, it is not the only way that sexuality may be felt and expressed. The Narrator illustrates this point well, as her sexuality is expressed more in terms of desires and situational experiences. The power of sexuality-assemblage for her, and perhaps for anyone, is that it gives her access to alternate paths for being sexual and experiencing her sexuality, whether she chooses to take them or not.
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Coffee made Cuckolds & Eunuchs: Interaction with an Ottoman Drink in 17th-Century English Society

Mary Pierce
Ph.D. Candidate
Early Modern Europe and World History
University of Arizona

Abstract
The main aim of this paper is to illuminate the interconnection between socio-cultural anxieties, paradoxes and contradictions in seventeenth-century English society, the controversy swirling around the emergence of the Ottoman-imported beverage coffee, and the establishments in which it was consumed. The project demonstrates that the ever-present concerns surrounding the tenuous state of patriarchal manhood and the ambiguous dispositions of the English people towards the Ottoman Turks collectively helped to both encourage and discourage interactions with the exotic novelty from the Islamic world. The aspiring cosmopolitans embraced the occasion and enthusiastically intermingled with the new cultural practice already known to their Turkish, Arab, and Persian counterparts since the early sixteenth-century. By contrast, the critics abhorred the Islamic-imported coffee drinking habit, and did not hesitate to condemn the enthusiasts’ cosmopolitanism. They proclaimed the craze for coffee and coffeehouses as a sign of degeneration, threatening not just Englishmen’s religious identity, but also their manliness.

Key Words: Coffee, Coffeehouse, Manhood, Marriage, Anxiety, Cuckoldry, The Turks, Effeminate, Eunuch.

Most of us today as we congregate in coffee places to drink coffee and socialize cannot imagine that over three centuries ago Englishmen were proclaimed as impotent and cuckolds for embracing the Turkish-imported coffeehouse culture. Because of the oriental origins of the novelty, the craze for the seemingly innocent hot beverage and the establishment in which it was consumed alarmed many in England specifically about the drink’s effeminating impact on English men. And, some did not hesitate to express their anxiety about the erosive threat of the exotic cultural practice to Englishmen’s manliness. While ridiculing the English coffee enthusiasts for imitating the Turkish habit, the critics also cried out that “our men . . . justly
esteemed the *Ablest Performers* in Christendome,” now “to our unspeakable Grief, we find” nothing but the “*Decay of* true Old English Vigour.”¹ For, sipping on that “Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called *COFFEE*” made “them not capable of performing . . . their duty” as husbands and satisfying the expectations of their women.² The “pittiful drink . . . [has] Crippled” once gallant Englishmen, and made them “Impotent,” thus cuckolded.³ The question is then why would the interaction with the Turkish phenomenon provoke such anxiety about English manhood and effeminacy?

**The Rise of Coffee and Coffeehouses in 17th-Century England.**

Upon the arrival of coffee and coffeehouses in England in 1652, the Ottoman novelty became the obsession of the age, stirring all sorts of heated debates about its virtues, and its menacing threat to English culture. Despite the controversies, however, the exotic phenomenon rapidly gained momentum among English consumers. By 1663, eleven years after Pasqua Rosée, an Ottoman subject, opened the first coffeehouse in London, the number of coffeehouses had reached over eighty in this city alone, and by the close of the century there were around 2,000. People could walk to the end of almost any street in London and find a coffeehouse. If the hanging sign of “Turk’s Head” or “Sultan’s Head” did not catch the eye, all one had to do was to follow the intoxicating aroma of roasting coffee to the coffee place. The exhilarating fragrance of coffee, according to a patron who had entered a coffeehouse for the first time, would convert even those with the least interest in this exotic foreign beverage. Upon entering the coffeehouse, he wrote, the place seemed like a “big

¹ Anon., *The Women’s Petition Against Coffee, Representing to Publick Consideration the Grand Inconvenience accruing to their SEX from the Excessive Use of that Drying, Enfeebling LIQUOR* (London: 1673/4), 1.
² *The Women’s Petition Against Coffee*, 2.
³ *The Women’s Petition Against Coffee*, 2, 6.
booth of a cheap-jack . . . [then] When I had sat there for a while, and taken in my surroundings, I myself felt inclined for a cup of coffee.”

The exotic establishments, similar to those in Ottoman cities, became centers par excellence of male sociability. Men of all sorts, including merchants, journalists, doctors, lawyers, members of the Parliament, and city workers, frequented the coffeehouses without fearing discrimination. A satirist described the coffeehouses as “Noah’s Ark” where “Quack, country bumpkins, philosophers, shoemakers . . . and ‘Clean or unclean’” were received without distinction. There, English patrons, some even wearing the Turkish male attire, would sit for hours and hours and interact with each other while sipping the exotic drink.

As for female clients, no explicit rules banned women from the establishments. It was generally assumed, however, that no virtuous and proper woman would wish to be seen in these male homosocial spaces. This did not mean that women were never seen in the seventeenth-century English coffeehouses. In fact, women often worked as barmaids in the establishments, and some even owned the places, particularly those established towards the latter part of the century. While no reliable record cites names of coffeehouse maids, seventeenth-century London daily periodicals, as well as annual reports, mentioned several women who owned and ran coffeehouses in London. In the business section of the London Gazette, for instance, appear references to widows who owned their own coffee places. Kemp’s Coffee-House and Landsel’s Coffee-House were among those owned by women. During the

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late decades of the seventeenth-century, many English women also held coffee retailing licenses. Elizabeth Daplin, Elizabeth Povey, Katherine Noake, Bethia Andrews, Mary Smith, Mary Grace, Anne Harvey, Ursula Fleming, and Elizabeth Accum were among those who held such authorization.\footnote{Session of Peace, MJ/SBB/298 (January 13, 1673), quoted in Berry, “Nice and Curious Questions,” 261.}

English coffeehouses, also known as penny universities, were cheap. Customers could frequent them daily and sometimes several times a day.\footnote{Ellis, The Penny University, 44-5, 57, 239.} For one penny, any patron could enter a coffeehouse and drink coffee, while engaging for hours and hours in all sorts of frivolous or serious debates. Inappropriate practices in English coffeehouses, as in those of Istanbul, were also not uncommon. The establishments were sometimes likened to brothels for male-male and male-female illicit conducts. Contemporary English moralists warned about the coffeehouses becoming “hot-houses” for “women of ill-fame” and effeminate men engaging in immoral behaviors.\footnote{Brian Cowan, The Social Life of Coffee (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 118-19, 252-53; Ellis, The Coffee-House, 44, 112.} The socio-morally subversive behaviors exacerbated the ire of the opponents of the Ottoman substance, and further alarmed the state officials, resulting in royal proclamations against the coffee places. Nevertheless, the coffee craze persisted. The coffeehouses continued to provide their clients with a chance to taste what their Turkish, Arab, and Persian counterparts had known since the early sixteenth-century. After all, it was in this oriental imported establishment that the novices could come into direct contact with the cultural practices of their distant Muslim neighbors. Thus, enthused by this opportunity, aspiring cosmopolitans embraced the exotic novelty.

Diffusion of this foreign substance into English culture, however, was not without conflict. While one sector of society, the optimists, greeted the Ottoman-
imported phenomenon with a chorus of praise, others abhorred it and did not hesitate to express their disapproval. Enthusiasts defended their craze for the new exotic beverage by writing on its sobering, and healing, effects. Coffee, they argued, “keeps us sober,” and its “magnetic force…restore[s]” even the senses of those drunk “by immoderate Tippling heady of Liquors” in the ale-houses. Proclaiming the coffeehouse as the “Sanctuary of Health,” supporters declared the substance the latest remedy for almost all ailments. The dryness, coldness, warmness, and moistness of coffee were linked to its beneficial effects. There was almost “no disease . . . that [the Turkish] drink” could not ease.

Conversely, the pessimists condemned the coffee consumers by maintaining that “the Palats [palates] of the English were as Fanatical, as their Brain.” English people, they wrote, “Like Apes” imitated “ridiculous Fashions” of others. Like the “Barbarous Indian” they smoked tobacco, and similar to “the Turk” they drank coffee. Critics mocked the admirers for parroting the fantastic medical discourses traveling from the shores of Turkey to England. Instead, they proclaimed coffee as a mere “Decoction of the Devils,” “syrrop [syrup] of soot,” and a drink “from Hell,” not fit for English constitution. The opponents also vilified the establishment where the oriental drink was consumed. The coffeehouse, they argued, was not a venue for learned men, but fit for the English “infidels,” meaning those who had turned “Turk” by embracing the Ottoman novelty. The critics proclaimed the anarchistic craze for

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11 *The Character of a Coffee-House*, 3-5; *Coffee-Houses Vindicated in Answer to the late Published Character of a Coffee-House*, 2-5.
15 *A Cup of Coffee*, 1; Anon., *A Broad-side against Coffee; Or, the Marriage of the Turk* (London: 1672), 1. Coffee opponents described the coffeehouses as an unnatural place for
the Islamic-imported cultural practice as a sign of degeneration, threatening not just English people’s Christian identity, but also Englishmen’s manliness, turning them effeminate.\textsuperscript{16} The Ottoman novelty indeed brought that distant Islamic empire right to the doorstep of England, making the two civilizations, to the detriment of many in England, cultural neighbors.

The central question this paper addresses is thus: why did the seemingly simple drink coffee and the establishment where it was consumed come to be seen as a threat to Englishmen’s manliness? To do so, it endeavors to shed light on the interconnection between the pervasive concerns about English manhood before the rise of the oriental novelty in England, the enduring biased view of the Ottoman Turks as sexually degenerate, and the contemptuous discourses by the English coffee opponents against intermingling with the exotic cultural phenomenon. The intent is to show that the discontent with the rise of the Turkish cultural practice in England was not developed out of the blue. With a careful examination of primary sources relevant to issues such as cuckoldry and effeminacy anxiety, as well as early modern texts on the Turks’ sexuality, the paper concludes that the prevalent anxiety about English manhood and the biased pre-existing mindset about the Ottomans helped in the aggregate to incite the hostile attitudes towards intermingling with the oriental novelty of coffee.

\textbf{English Manhood in Crisis.}

In early modern English society, manliness in broadly patriarchal terms was equated with an array of attributes including strength, reason, self-control, and the

\footnotesize{English consumers because there they were simply imitators of the Turks, or Muslims. The term “Turk” was used interchangeably at the time with “Muslim.”

\textsuperscript{16} A Cup of Coffee, 1; Anon., \textit{The Ale-Wives Complaint, Against the Coffee-Houses, in a Dialogue between a Victuallers Wife and A Coffee-Man, being at difference about spoiling each others Trade} (London: 1665), 2-3; \textit{The Women’s Petition Against Coffee}, 2, 6.}
ability to govern.\textsuperscript{17} These traits, according to patriarchal ideals of manhood, placed men superior to women who were perceived mostly as weak and unstable, and therefore to be governed. But these manly traits were not necessarily the birthright of all males. It was a privilege accorded to some, specifically married men, because marriage was one of the main gateways for early modern Englishmen, mostly the young, to full manhood.\textsuperscript{18} A male’s adult maturity was conferred mainly by way of matrimony and the achievement of the status of a household patriarch. A man without a household, according to some, unlike those married, had no direction and was said to be lost “in the midst of the sea,” unable to navigate a safe course in the turbulent sea of life.\textsuperscript{19} Nevertheless, getting married was not the end of the story for men and their manhood. Even within the confines of marriage, Englishmen found it difficult to achieve the ever-tenuous image of competent household heads, and prove their manliness.

As family patriarchs, married men were subjected to ideological expectations, and could easily lose their manly status if these were not fulfilled. For, a man’s honor and reputation rested upon a wide range of factors, particularly the governance of his wife’s sexual conduct. A husband who failed, for whatever reason, to safeguard his spouse’s chastity was deemed ineffectual, and would often face public humiliation. Even the seemingly innocent consumption of coffee, for instance, came to be seen as a threat to a man’s ability to control his wife, and therefore his manhood. As the

\textsuperscript{17} Alexandra Shepard, \textit{Meaning of Manhood in Early Modern England} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-9. Patriarchy is often defined as men’s systematic domination of women. But, Shepard points out that the generational dimension of patriarchy, when it is more specifically defined as “the government of society by male household heads, involves the subordination” of women as well as young men. Patriarchy, in early modern England, was simply perceived as rule by fathers.


\textsuperscript{19} Anon., \textit{Certain Sermons OR Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches, in the Time of Queen Elizabeth of famous memory} (London: 1673, first published 1562), 316.
coffee critics complained, the “whoring after such . . . destructive Foreign Liquors” not only resulted in spending “their money,” when they “have scarce Twopence to buy their children bread,” but also in losing their sexual virility. Frequenting coffeehouses at all hours of the day and night turned “Husbands . . . useless” to their wives, since they were no longer able to “answer the Vigour” of their women’s “Flames.” Coffee made them impotent. To be sure, failure to secure the continuous economic well-being of his household endangered a man’s honorable male status in the community. But, there could be nothing more devastating to a married man’s manly image than his inability to satisfy his wife sexually.

In fact, the public almost always blamed the wife’s infidelity on the husband’s poor performance in their marriage bed. English people commonly held the view that women were more libidinous in nature and unable to control their lustful impulses. So, the failure to manage the wife’s chastity, and physically satisfy her, was truly catastrophic for the married man’s public honor and manly reputation. Husbands’ blunders in the marital bed, rumor or fact, while shameful on a personal level, also marked them by the community as cuckolds, the most shameful label for a married man. This is not to suggest that English society tolerated female adultery. Contemporary didacts repeatedly discoursed about conjugal fidelity and described marriage as an institution in which all men and women were “to live chastely.”

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20 The Women's Petition against Coffee, 1-4.
21 The Women's Petition against Coffee, 2-3.
24 Foyster, Manhood in Early Modern England, 67. A cuckold was a man who was cheated by his wife. Sometimes a passive husband who was beaten by his spouse, or generally ruled by her, was also considered a cuckold for flouting, as a patriarch, the natural order of authority in his household. For more see, Laura Gowing, Domestic Dangers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 63.
Adultery was also subject to legal punishment.\(^{26}\) Nonetheless, a wife’s infidelity, while sinful and an assault upon her own reputation, would not necessarily put her womanhood in question like it did her spouse’s manhood and virility.\(^{27}\) Cuckoldry deflected the sinfulness of adultery by mocking the follies or inadequacies of the adulteress’s husband.\(^{28}\)

So how serious was cuckoldry anxiety in early modern England? Social stigma of being a cuckold and a presumed lack of virility was the source of much anxiety for early modern English married men and often resulted in the shattering of their households. Unable to cope with the shame of losing their socio-sexual reputation, and becoming the laughing stock of their community, some men simply deserted their wives or divorced them.\(^{29}\) As countless cases in early modern English church court records show, many husbands also launched defamation suits to salvage their names.\(^{30}\) In some instances, to win sympathy of the judges and rescue their degraded manly honor, the men even shifted the blame to their wives’ insatiable sexual appetites. One husband described his spouse as “a whore that no man, no matter how virile,” could satisfy.\(^{31}\) Occasionally, the slandered husbands also

\(^{26}\) In 1650, Parliament passed the draconian Adultery Act making all sorts of sexual transgressions, particularly by married couples, a capital offence.

\(^{27}\) In the early modern era, it was the occasion of a young woman’s first menstrual period, usually around age 14, that began her transition to womanhood, also making her marriageable. See, Sara Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1, 42-7.

\(^{28}\) Turner, *Fashioning Adultery*, 83.


\(^{30}\) Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, 159-61, 148-9. The husbands almost always footed the bill in such defamation suits since it also served their interests. Slander suits were ubiquitous all throughout the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, and those brought by women as plaintiff and defendant were proportionally higher. Between 1604 and 1660, for instance, over 140 of 225 such defamation cases heard in the Durham consistory were filed by women. In London, between 1570 and 1640, the majority of plaintiffs were also women. And, married women comprised over seventy-nine percent of all the early modern slander suits filed by women, mainly women of the middling sorts. Also see, Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 61; J. A. Sharpe, *Defamation and Sexual Slander in Early Modern England* (York: The University of York, 1980), 27, 17.

endured the loud public ritual known as the charivari, or rough riding as it was called in England. The charivari, a centuries-old practice rooted in folk culture in many parts of Europe, was a public display of disapproval of all sorts of socio-culturally inappropriate behaviors such as adultery. In England, the cheated husband would be pulled out of his house, seated on a horse facing its tail, and paraded while wearing horns on his ears as the crowd banged on pots and pans announcing his presence. Members of all social groups took part in these rituals, including law officials who sometimes even encouraged them. The purpose of the rough riding rested partly on the idea that the humiliation and contempt would help to strengthen cuckolded men to control their wives, and reinforce the household male gender hierarchy.

As for correcting women accused of cheating on their husbands, they were usually mocked, beaten and ducked publicly, or carted through the streets. Sometimes, the husband would take matters into his own hands by committing physical violence, including mutilation of the face, against his wife. In 1613, Joseph Pattison of Durham, for instance, slit the nose of his supposedly unfaithful wife to give her a whore’s mark, shaming her even further. The second wife of Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn (1533-36), and his fifth one, Kathryn Howard (1540-42), were the first

36 Foyster, *Manhood in Early Modern England*, 182. A slit nose, as it was believed in early modern Europe, was a visible symbol of a dishonored married woman.
women officially beheaded on charges of adultery.\textsuperscript{37} While the frequency and effectiveness of the shaming rituals and punishments of defamed couples remain uncertain, such practices certainly provide telling evidence of how the slandered married couples were highly stigmatized in early modern England, perpetuating men’s fear of their women’s unchastity.

So prevalent was cuckoldry anxiety, or the suspicion thereof, that it was often alluded to even on early modern English stage. In William Shakespeare’s play \textit{Much Ado about Nothing}, Benedick’s early reluctance in taking a wife stems from his anxieties about becoming a cuckold. Whether out of concern about his manly insecurity or female philandering, Benedick proclaims his mistrust of all women, and that he “will live a bachelior” rather than wearing “the bulles hornes” as a married man.\textsuperscript{38} To him, to be married was to be cuckolded. Even the late seventeenth-century correspondence from Englishmen to weekly periodicals such as the \textit{Athenian Gazette} reflected the ongoing anxiety surrounding marital infidelity and cuckoldry. These publications provided a service similar to our modern day advice column \textit{Dear Abby}. Usually, they consisted of one or a team of authors who answered the anonymous letters sent to them by men and women asking questions about matters including courtship, marriage, and marital infidelity.\textsuperscript{39} Much of the correspondence to the column came from males concerned about how to deal with their adulterous wives and their own public reputation. For instance, in a letter printed on Friday, 4 March 1693, one asked whether a man should be a “blind Complaisance” to being cuckolded

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item William Shakespeare, \textit{Much Adoe About Nothing}, 103 (Act I, Scene I, 72).
\item Helen Berry, \textit{Gender, Society and Print Culture in Late-Stuart England: The Cultural World of the Athenian Mercury} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), xii; Turner, \textit{Fashioning Adultery}, 64-6.
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by his wife while he was at sea. In a 1694 issue, a betrayed husband sought advice on how to control his unruly spouse who wore “the breeches” and was “abominably lusty,” making him a cuckold.

It should be noted that the angst about cuckoldry was not exclusive to English society only. There was a cultural obsessive preoccupation with wives’ infidelity in most of continental Europe during the Renaissance and early modern era as well. And, as in the English case, this cultural anxiety was often mediated in popular literature. In Italy, for instance, being cuckolded by a wife was one of the unavoidable aspects of marriage that husbands had to accept. As a fifteenth-century Florentine print points out, nothing “is certain in this world, except death and horns.” In the same vein, some of the most marketed French satirical literature also sought to expose the prevalent fear of male impotence, cuckoldry, and female adultery in early modern France. In his 1657 *Illustres Proverbes*, satirist Jacque Lagniet, for example, often emphasized wives’ sexual transgressions as a phenomenon inherent in marriage. In one case, Lagniet showcases how a jealous husband’s fear of being shamed by his wife comes true when he discovers an elegant, gallant man hiding in a chest in the bedroom. Interestingly though, coffee drinking seemed to play no role in lowering men’s sexual potency, making them effeminate or explaining why they were cuckolded, in continental European cultures. The Ottoman novelty, mainly the bean,

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was introduced in Italian ports, such as Venice, as early as the 1570s. In France, coffee made its appearance in Marseilles around 1644 and in Paris in 1657. Coffee became so popular in Paris that vendors strolled through the streets selling the hot beverage door to door.

Then, what was it about coffee drinking and coffeehouses that seemed, as it did to their detractors in England, threatening to Englishmen’s manly virility, even making them effeminate? The following pages argue the fact that the controversy surrounding the oriental novelty’s emergence in England was shaped partly by anxieties about its Turkish origin and an association with male Ottoman Turks’ presumed effeminate traits. The concept of the Ottoman Turks’ effeminacy was routinely evoked, even if anecdotal or brief, in all sorts of early modern European literature, including that of England. As part of the topoi of sexual excess and perversion, early modern English scholars and travel writers often depicted the Turkish Empire, its Muslim inhabitants, and cultural practices. Ottoman Turkey epitomized the world of human vices. In his *Generall Historie of the Turkes*, Richard Knolles, while calling the Ottoman Turks “the present terror of the world,” also characterized the Sultan and his “Janizaries” as corrupted, “voluptuous . . . [and] effeminate.” The diminishing greatness and “true valour” of the Islamic Empire, to Knolles, was linked to their lecherous taste. Knolles had never visited the Islamic world. A British diplomat in Istanbul, Paul Rycaut, in *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, also attributed the supposedly degenerating state of the Turkish

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45 Ellis, *The Coffee-House*, 82.
48 Richard Knolles, *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (London: 1603), “A Brief discourse of the greatness of the Turkish Empire,” 87-89. The Janissaries were the Ottoman infantry unit who also served as the Sultan’s guards.
49 Knolles, *Historie of the Turkes*, 87-89.
Empire to the effeminacy of the Ottomans including the Sultan and his warriors. Rycaut wrote at length about the homoerotic infatuation of the Turkish ruler and other courtly officials with male pages in the royal court.\(^5^0\) Whether the English diplomat ever witnessed such conduct remains unclear.

Upon his visit to Istanbul in 1613, Thomas Coryat, in his discussion of everyday life in Ottoman society, used similar epithets, including effeminate, for the Ottomans, and claimed that male-male sex was a commonplace phenomenon in Islamic societies.\(^5^1\) William Lithgow (1582-1645) and the famous English traveler George Sandys (1577-1644) used similar denigrating tropes to demonize the Turks. Lithgow, a native of Scotland, who described the Turks as barbarous and cruel, proclaimed all Muslim men were doomed to “Hell” because of their excessive inclination to the practice of sodomy, or “buggery” as he called it.\(^5^2\) In 1615, Sandys, in *The Relation of a Journey*, even extended his biased discourse on the male-male sexual tastes among the Turks to include comments on the usual occurrence of such practices, even in Ottoman coffeehouses. For instance, in Istanbul’s coffeehouses beautiful young male servers were hired to serve coffee to clients and to gratify their homoerotic sexual appetites. The coffeehouse proprietors used the attendants as “a


lure or bait” to attract more customers. To Sandys, Turkish coffee establishments were basically centers of effeminate lustful males in search of same-sex erotic experiences. The biased rhetoric did not go unnoticed. Decades later, while the English coffee detractors did not explicitly eroticize the Ottoman-imported coffeehouses, they also described them as an effeminate environment.

**Did Coffee Effeminate?**

Obviously the Turkish drink coffee did not generate the anxiety about effeminacy in early modern England. English society was already grappling with the burgeoning subculture of effeminate men. As early as 1598, English poet and playwright John Marston (1576-1634), in his poem *The Scourge of Villanie*, made references to English male brothels or “male stewes,” as they were known in the sixteenth-century. Marston also condemned those engaging in the “Monstrous filth of . . . feminary,” or effeminacy. Similarly, in his *Diary*, even Samuel Pepys showed concerns about the regularity of male-male sexual relationships in England, particularly in London. The practice, he wrote, “is now almost grown as common among our gallant” Englishmen as those of Italy.

But, the “lecherous vice,” as some seventeenth-century sodomy trial cases show, was not perceived as part of the Englishmen’s natural constitution or traits. It was mainly associated with the male inhabitants of inferior distant lands such as

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54 John Marston, *The Scourge of Villanie: Three Bookes of Satyres* (London: 1598), B6-13; available in EEBO and the Huntington Library. The reference to “male stewes” is also mentioned in Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (Boston: GMP Publishers, 1988), 53. Stewes were more than likely private homes or clubs.
southern Europe and the entire Islamic world, including the Ottoman societies, which tolerated it.\textsuperscript{57} When Domingo Cassedon Drago, a Moor, was put on trial in Essex in 1647 on charges of sexual relations with an English youth, his race was repeatedly evoked in the process of his conviction.\textsuperscript{58} While the precise outcome of the trial remains obscure, it is not improbable to argue that the accused alien would be found as the morally degenerate one with no manly virtue, and thus, the polluting influence. While apprehensive about the growing effeminate male subculture in English society, to many the phenomenon was unlikely a homegrown one. Rather, it was the consequence of an infectious imported, alien vice, afflicting those easily swayed.

The English populace, men in particular, as it was commonly believed, mindlessly imitated and surrendered to foreign manners and habits. Marston characterized Englishmen as “Farre worse then Apes . . . imitators of lewd beastliness” who imitated the style and the “hell devised lustful villanies” of others.\textsuperscript{59} Over half a century later, this view also resonated in the contemptuous discourses against the coffee enthusiasts. The critics, for instance, described the advocates as “Pure English Apes” who “imitate all other people in their ridiculous . . . Customes,” even the Turks, Indians, and French.\textsuperscript{60} And to be in fashion, they added, Englishmen “would eat spiders too.”\textsuperscript{61} Thus, effeminacy, even to English coffee detractors, was another imported phenomenon, this time through coffee from the land of effeminate Turks, encroaching on England and threatening English manliness.

This paper has shown how the emergence of the Turkish-imported coffee drinking habit exacerbated pre-existing anxieties about the state of English manhood.

\textsuperscript{57} Bray, Homosexuality, 75.
\textsuperscript{58} Bray, Homosexuality, 40-41, 73. The precise nationality of Domingo Cassedon Drago remains obscure.
\textsuperscript{59} Marston, The Scourge of Villanie, H-H2.
\textsuperscript{60} A Character of Coffee and Coffee-Houses, 1; A Cup of Coffee: OR, Coffee in its Colours.
\textsuperscript{61} A Cup of Coffee: OR, Coffee in its Colours.
What made the case of coffee more unsettling, however, was not merely the consumption of the exotic beverage, but also the establishment where it was consumed. The opponents, because of the reputation of Ottoman coffeehouses as centers of homoerotic pleasures, saw the homosocial environment of English coffeehouses as effeminating. They feared that regular intermingling with that effeminizing Turkish cultural habit degenerated curious Englishmen’s manly virility, making them as impotent as eunuchs and unable to satisfy their women who ultimately cuckolded them.
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Searching for the Beloved:
Rediscovering Homoerotic Representations in Ottoman Art

David Q. Loisel
M.A. Candidate
Department of Art and Art History
University of South Florida

Abstract

Over the past decade, the subject of erotic imagery has gained renewed attention among scholars of Islamic studies. Despite this accelerated interest in eroticism in Islamic art, homoerotic iconography continues to be vastly underrepresented and understudied. These homoerotic representations deserve close examination by virtue of the fact that they bring an Ottoman subculture and its lived experiences to the fore, often formulated in a surprisingly direct and unusually crude visual grammar. One such example is found in the Ottoman reproduction of Nev’îzâde Atâyi’s Khamsa, an illustrated collection of stories about morality and society. Focusing on several images, this paper argues that such scholarly negligence continues to marginalize alternative readings of homoerotic representations in Ottoman/Islamic societies and demands further investigation. In an attempt to address the centuries-long oversight concerning the relationship between the profoundly rich Ottoman and Islamic literary traditions on same-sex love on one hand and the alleged lack of references to the very same discourses in visual arts, the paper begins by questioning the Sufi metaphor of the “beloved” in relation to homoerotic expressions of male love. Going beyond mystical apperceptions of the lover/beloved relationship that perpetuate the diminution of homosexuality within the Ottoman Empire, the paper attempts to demonstrate that Ottoman homoerotic visual representations embodied a much wider range of sexual connections, including romantic and non-spiritual encounters intended solely for earthly sexual pleasure. By underscoring the lived realities of homosexuality in the early modern Ottoman era, the paper aims to provide a greater understanding of the contexts wherein same-sex encounters were represented.

Key Words: Lover and Beloved, Sufi, Nev’îzâde Atâyi, Khamsa, Same-sex, Illustrated Manuscripts, Ottoman/Islamic Art, Homoerotic Art, Early Modern, Ottoman Empire, Abū Nawās, Tülay Artan, Pederasty, Liwāt, Mukhannas.

Scholars of Islamic art have recently begun exploring artistic depictions of erotic themes. Many of these depictions involve imagery containing homoerotic subjects that previous scholarship has vastly overlooked. In these homoerotic representations, a particular subculture of the population is brought to light, offering a
rare glimpse into the lived experiences of individuals existing in early modern Islamic societies. One such work is found in an eighteenth-century Ottoman reproduction of Nev’izâde Atâyi’s Khamsa. The Khamsa, or Pentalogy, is a richly illustrated literary work consisting of five poems alongside erotic scenes. Two images depict noteworthy homoerotic scenarios: Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male (fig. 1) and Young Male Being Used by Group (fig. 2). These illustrations give the viewer voyeuristic access to two unabashedly erotic copulation scenes potentially inciting both interest and reservation. It is only until recently, however, that contemporary scholars have begun to address considerations of same-sex depictions omitted from Arab and Islamic histories. These omissions are even more perplexing when considering the recent resurgence of interest in Islamic erotic literature and poetry over the last thirty years. This inattention, or lack of scholarly interest, has perpetuated a critical disconnect between the homoerotic literary and visual traditions, resulting in a significant lack of art-historical understanding on the topic of “homosexuality” in pre-modern Ottoman society. The same dissonance between literary and visual representations is perhaps why scholars such as Tûlay Artan

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1 In other scholarship the Khamsa is also translated as the Hamse or Hamse-i Atayi (Quintet of Atayi).
2 It is important to note that the terms “homosexual” and “homosexuality” are complex and contingent on powerful factors including time, space, and social-cultural constructs. It would be erroneous to apply modern Western conceptualizations of gender and sexuality to persons living in the pre-modern Islamic Ottoman Empire. Issues concerning appropriate terminology, categorization, and understanding are addressed in the pivotal collaborative effort published in Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi’s Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). In the work’s preface, the editors attempt to reallocate the term same-sex practices in place of “homosexuality” in an attempt to “undo some of the cultural burden” associated with Foucauldian typologies (page xi). The discussion also considers the cross-cultural encounters between Islamicate and European societies, shaped in part by colonialism that transformed perceptions of gender and sexuality in both Europe and the East. This cultural exchange can be viewed in the Orientalist tropes perpetuated by Europeans exemplified in terms such as pederasty. These terms were given negative connotations used to describe the numerous homoerotic experiences in the Ottoman Empire. Babayan argues that these charged words were “grounded in the Islamicate world in historically specific ways” and need to be carefully navigated (page x). For the sake of clarity within this paper, I will refer to male-to-male encounters as same-sex or homoerotic.
interpret the emergence of homoerotic art in the eighteenth-century in exclusive relation to the rise of “public spaces” within early modern cities, omitting the lived existence of such subcultures before the urbanization of the city space. In an attempt to address the shortcomings of this argument, I will propose that the absence of such imagery does not invalidate its existence before the eighteenth-century, especially considering pervasive records of homoerotic encounters in earlier Ottoman literary traditions.3

For the purposes of this research, I will focus solely on male-to-male visual representations of male same-sex practices within illustrated manuscripts from the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire.4 While my research will be based on the close visual analysis of the two above-mentioned images from the Hamse-i Atayi, it is first necessary to examine contemporary scholarship on Ottoman homoerotic visual art and literature addressing academic trends that correlate homoerotic male love with Sufi metaphor.5 I argue that these singular monolithic interpretations perpetuate the

4 Though there does exist a handful of illustrations depicting female-to-female erotic encounters that demand further research, I will limit the range and scope of this paper to a discussion of male-to-male representations. Afsaneh Najmabadi’s Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005) begins to tackle this immensely silenced space in modern Islamic scholarship, focusing on pre-modern sexual identities in Iran.
5 Dror Ze’evi, in his book Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East 1500-1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 12-15, 82-87, offers a sizable overview of how Sufi theories, including Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (1164-1240) concept of wahdat al-wujūd (the unity of being), purported that “love could be either felt toward God (directly) or towards things that God loves (and therefore indirectly toward God)” (82). Sufis further developed the concept of “gazing at beauty as a path” to the true love of God as only true love could be attained through worldly admiration (of things) (82). However, traditionally, Ottoman Sufis applied this gazing towards the beauty of young beardless boys (al-nazar ila al-amrad). This homosocial preference was then coupled with Sufi rituals (dhikr or Turkish zikir) involving music and dance, producing an “irresistible erotic mixture” for transcendent emotional experiences. This cultural and theoretical fusion would be the catalyst for much of the Ottoman world’s homoerotic literature (83). For more information on this tradition, see also Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson, Completely Queer: the Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), 304.
diminution of same-sex practices within the Ottoman Empire, ignoring a far greater historical range of lived experiences beyond the poetic Sufi apperceptions of the so-called Lover/Beloved relationship. This negligence in the academic discussion continues to marginalize numerous other readings of homoerotic representations and demands further investigation. Through this paper’s analysis, I aim to demonstrate that Ottoman homoerotic visual representations embodied a much wider range of sexual connections beyond metaphorical Sufi symbolism, including romantic, non-spiritual relationships, as well as amorous encounters based solely on earthly sexual gratification. To this end, I will examine relevant examples from contemporaneous eighteenth-century Islamic and French imagery to better assess and draw parallels between male same-sex encounters within the early modern city space. This research hopes to contribute to the knowledge surrounding homoerotic representations, lending further insight into long-overlooked imagery within Ottoman/Islamic art, while addressing the scholarly disconnect between homoerotic visual representations and literary sources. In so doing, this paper efforts to underscore the lived realities of homosexuals in the pre-modern Ottoman era and provide a greater understanding of the contexts that homosexual encounters could have potentially represented. This study will begin with a discussion of the current state of scholarship surrounding homosexuality in the Ottoman/Islamic world.

**State of Scholarship.**

In my preliminary research, I found only a limited number of contemporary sources on homoerotic visual imagery in the Ottoman Empire. The artistic traditions of the Ottoman Empire were rich in erotica and spanned numerous mediums and artistic styles including oral literature (songs, tales, curses, riddles, etc.), poetry,
illustrated texts, belletrists, as well as biographical and medical writings. However, the vast majority of contemporary scholarship has to a large extent ignored homoerotic visual representations and their relation to their literary counterparts. Before addressing this staggering imbalance between scholarship surrounding erotic literature and visual representations, I will provide an overview of some of the most prevalent scholars and their contributions to recent research on Ottoman erotic art from the early modern era, beginning with erotic literature and poetry.

In recent decades, erotic poetry has received the most academic attention, spearheaded by prominent scholars such as J. W. Wright and Everett K. Rowson. In their pioneer work, *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature* (1997), the authors explore the literary works of writers from the Islamic medieval period including Abū Nawās (756-814 CE), the most frequently referenced poet dealing with homoerotic themes. Wright and Rowson also expound on earlier scholarship that interpreted homoerotic poetry as a metaphorical extension of Sufi theory depicted in the relationship of the Lover and the Beloved. Poets including Abū Nawās equated “chaste love” (non-physical love) for other men in their poetry, and often directly correlated the adoration of young pubescent males, with the divine love of Allah for the believer. James T. Monroe, another scholar contributing to *Homoeroticism in Classical Arabic Literature*, states, “It should be indicated that the mystics of Islam

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6 Tülay Artan and Irvin Cemil Schick in *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art*, ed. Francesca Leoni and Mika Natif (Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013), 157-158. Here *belletrists* are defined as literature regarded as a fine art, often viewed as having a purely aesthetic function.


included among their meditative practices the contemplation of beautiful pubescent boys, who were considered witnesses ‘to the beauty of God and the glory of His creation.’”

This link between homoeroticism and Sufi theory came to dominate scholarship, until recently, hindering interpretations beyond that of a spiritual metaphor. While Wright and others in this text offer broad foundational research concerning erotic themes in Islamic poetry, their examination remains primarily a survey attesting to the blossoming interest in the field of literature. The limited examples of homoerotic experiences also provided in their literary examinations are disparagingly linked to a culture of pederasty that vastly marginalizes other potential interpretations of the lived experiences within the daily life of Ottoman subjects.

A decade later, Khaled El-Rouayheb published his research on Islamic poetry, with a specific focus on Ottoman poetry from the period of 1500-1800. This much-needed etymological approach addresses numerous inconsistencies ascribed to Islamic poetry by scholarship from the 1960s and 1970s. El-Rouayheb’s research critically re-examines the numerous misrepresentative publications that translated and/or interpreted Ottoman poetry as being directed towards a feminine beloved. Reassessing numerous lines of poetry, El-Rouayheb chose to highlight the direct references to facial hair or beard-down (‘idhār) on the young beloved’s cheeks, noted by various Ottoman writers. For instance, El-Rouayheb focuses on the translations and interpretations of Syrian scholar Muhammad Khalīl al-Murādī, emphasizing several lines in which al-Murādī’s translations diminish the blatant and abundant

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10 This limited scope is a perfect example of Babayan’s perceived threat of a limited and potentially Orientalizing interpretation, mentioned above in Footnote 1.


12 Ibid., 4-6.
references to ‘idhār, purposely ignoring the direct homoerotic references in the translated literature. For example, lines from poets such as ‘Alī al-‘Imādī (d. 1706) state, “I should not have thought before the sprouting of his ‘idhār that ‘idhār would confirm his beauty,” or the exclamation by Mustafā ibn Pīrī (d. 1735), “Is it ‘idhār that has appeared on this your cheeks, or have snares appeared for the catching of hearts?”

The overt omissions of references to features of young masculine beauty discussed by previous scholarship does raise a litany of questions regarding modern perceptions of the Islamic world’s homoerotic histories. Thus, the importance of El-Rouayheb’s scholarship cannot be overstated as his insights have transformed modern discourse concerning the potential translations of poetry produced in the Islamic world, allowing for a more holistic interpretation of sexuality in Ottoman contexts.

Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe’s *Islamic Homosexualities* (1997) is by far the most widely referenced work on homoerotic material from the Islamic world. This fact attests to the depth and breadth of their research, as well as their inclusion of homoerotic visual representations that have rarely been discussed previously. Up until the publication of *Islamic Homosexualities*, much of the conversation surrounding homosexuality in the Islamic world was analyzed through social constructionist theory. Accordingly, homosexual subcultures were understood as being directly informed and defined by their unique cultural climates and not through sexual orientation or individual identity.

Murray and Roscoe complicate these perceptions of homosexual identity from the very beginning of their work. The authors state that, “social constructionist accounts still evoke a history of homosexuality as a progressive, even teleological evolution from pre-modern

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13 Ibid., 5.
repression, silence, and invisibility to modern visibility, and social reform.” Murray and Roscoe insist that further approaches need to be developed in order to discuss the range and depth of same-sex experiences beyond such singular Western conceptions of sexuality, further analyzing both the community and the individual. However, Murray and Roscoe’s inefficacy in addressing the multifaceted nature of Ottoman/Islamic homoerotic experiences demanded a new approach that would address the complicated nature of sexuality outside of Western philosophical discourses. This same invocation stressed the importance of considering Islamic sexuality beyond the confines of Euro-Western ideologies of sexual identity and gender and emphasized the need for new terms and theoretical approaches to Islamic sexuality in pre-modern eras. While Murray and Roscoe, like their contemporaries Wright and Rowson, were not able to formulate an amply applicable theoretical approach concerning gender and sexuality within Islamic societies, they did propel the discussion further, opening new paths of inquiry for emerging gender theorists. It would not be until the 2013 publication of *Eros and Sexuality in Islamic Art* that a concise and introspective collaborative work on erotic visual imagery within historical Islamic cultural contexts emerged, prompting my curiosity and questions towards several images from the *Hamse-i Atayi*.

**The Khamsa of Nev’izâde Atâyî.**

The *Khamsa* of Nev’izâde Atâyî is a rhymed poem in five sections dating to the mid-eighteenth-century and is currently housed in the Turkish and Islamic Art Museum in Istanbul. The two images at the center of my research once accompanied

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15 Ibid., 5.
16 Ibid., 4.
Atâyi’s text discussing the private lives of the lower classes in Ottoman society, juxtaposing the private and public spheres. These stories were not typically found in the high literature, commonly produced for and used by court circles, due to their focus on common everyday experiences. Atâyi’s work would become a notable transition from the poetry and biographical narratives that dominated the writings of courtly scholars during previous eras and reveals a more widely consumed literature produced in centuries before. Interestingly, the Khamsa explores less traditional themes of pleasure and passion rarely associated with lower class cultures in Ottoman literature prior to the eighteenth-century. Tülay Artan explains that in his prose, Atâyi discusses topics that did not have prototypes in Islamic art including bad morals, topics of theft, lying, bribery, and sensual acts of pleasure. It is also significant to note how often and widely circulated reproductions of Atâyi’s manuscript had become by the beginning of the nineteenth-century. The sheer reproduction of Atâyi’s stories reveals how ubiquitous provocative imagery, including homoerotic encounters, remained during the eighteenth-century in the Ottoman Empire.

In the first depiction, Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male (fig. 1), the viewer finds the illustrated manuscript to have been created in surprisingly rudimentary style compared to the elaborate images that are often associated with the Ottoman imperial court. Illustrated on paper, the bright hues suggestively attempt to mimic the dazzling jewel-like colors implemented by court painters, further exemplifying the painterly styles of the Islamic artistic tradition. While no evidence of elaborate gold leaf inlay is present in this version, there is, however, rich and detailed ornamentation that

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19 Ibid., 92-94. This understanding is inaccurate as there were several literary pieces on topics discussing morality and immoral behaviors, such as the Magamat.
20 Ibid., 91-92, and Joseph A. Boone, The Homoerotics of Orientalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 75. Boone mentions the scene from Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male to have been reproduced in multiple replications of Hamse-i Atayi—for example, Fig. 4, taken from Tülay Artan’s article “Mahremiyet: Mahrumiyetin Resmi.”
characterized the vast majority of Islamic art. These familiar arabesques and floral elements can be viewed covering the majority of the picture plane including the floors, walls, windows, doorways, and even the pillow supporting one of the main figures. The inclusion of these designs generates both volume and depth while simultaneously creating distinct and separate spaces within the relatively flat image. This detail carries over into the rendering of the faces and head adornments of each of the characters that are further differentiated by contrasting colors. The figures in the background are most likely based on stock types, especially as evident in the two repeated facial types of the thin-mustached characters towards the top and the full-bearded men on the bottom row. This figural repetition nicely contrasts with the individuality imbued in the main subjects located in the lower portion of the scene, albeit, crudely.

Each rendered individual is given a unique head adornment and detailed facial expression signifying their prominence in the scene. This implied distinction, however, is quickly curtailed when the subject matter of the scene is fully realized. The viewer quickly observes two males engaged in anal intercourse. Both individuals are partially clothed, a consistent commonality found in the majority of Ottoman erotic imagery, perhaps alluding to the secretive or rushed nature such encounters might have entailed. Only the lower body parts are exposed on each figure, further emphasizing the physical, carnal connection between them. The buttocks and genitalia are extremely simplistic in their rendering with almost no detail given to skin, texture, or anatomical precision—an odd juxtaposition to the detail implemented in the wrinkles and folds of the shirts adorning the torsos.

The facial expression depicted on the two males is almost humorously difficult to interpret, as each partner appears to be having a different reaction to their
encounter. The older male appears at first to be irritated, his mustache falling sharply to both sides of his face, becoming a giant caricatured frown, while the active youth coolly smiles from behind. This differentiation in the figures’ emotive expressions strikes one as odd as the large majority of erotic Ottoman art depicts solemn or even expressionless facial gestures. However, it is upon the magnification of the older male’s face that one notices a miniscule but apparent up-turned U-shape hidden underneath the bearded figure’s mustache (fig. 3). The disgruntled bearded male was in fact enjoying the tryst after all! Though this might at first appear frivolous and inconsequential, I argue that the small emotive delineation captured in the figure’s smile potentially offers tremendous insight into the image’s intended contextualization and reception. To comprehend why, however, one must understand the social context surrounding these two amorous figures and the sexual hierarchies that dictated the sexual customs of the early modern Ottoman male. Two sociocultural facets that need further articulation include early modern Islamic perceptions of gender and age disparity. These two factors arguably reveal how conceptualizations of early modern homoerotic encounters potentially led to the artist’s inclusion of the older male’s hidden smile.

Pre-modern Ottoman/Islamic perceptions of age disparity and gender/sexuality are both potent cultural factors that operated in tandem potentially shaping the artist’s illustration of the images in Atâyî’s *Khamsa*. The majority of homoerotic representations within the Islamic tradition share a common model when displaying homoerotic experiences where the active partner (the penetrating male) is usually depicted to be older and the passive partner (the penetrated male) is considerably

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21 Boone, 75. Boone notes this odd variance in the facial expression of the two men in his visual analysis with the words, “the youth seems quite happy to be mounting his disgruntled looking senior.”
younger. Typically this age differentiation is signified by the inclusion of more facial hair or a beard on the older male, a classical symbol of virility within the Islamic world. This significant and consistent reference to an age disparity in homoerotic encounters is one of the most widely represented themes in Ottoman erotic art, both literary and visual, and usually correlated to the overt cultural acceptance of “pederasty” in the pre-modern era. A prime example of this can be viewed in a second image from another version of Nev’îzâde Atâyi’s Khamsa titled *Young Male Being Used by Group* (fig. 2).

While this theme in Ottoman artistic traditions undoubtedly has roots in the above-mentioned Sufi writings and rituals, I suggest these analogous representations also correlate to pre-modern Islamic social customs concerning male sexuality. Similar cultural constructs are discussed by El-Rouayheb in his text *Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World, 1500-1800.* El-Rouayheb states, “the modern concept of homosexuality was absent from pre-modern Arab-Islamic cultures, which, like classical Greek and Roman culture, tended to categorize and evaluate people according to whether they were active or passive in a sexual relation.” This cultural “evaluation” is why recent scholars claim pederasty to be/have been the dominant form of homosexual experience in Islamic societies. A recent book, *The

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22 James Smalls, *Gay Art* (London: Sirrocco, 2008), 137. Smalls references the poetry of Abū Nuwās in which he portrays himself as a man attracted to “adolescent youths with slender waists to whom he gives only the passive role in the sexual encounters.”


24 Pederasty has long been associated with the Islamic world and is suggested by Roscoe to have been a cross-cultural adaptation from ancient Greek and Roman societies (*Islamic Homosexualities*, 56-58). Until recently, the vast majority of scholarship on homoerotic representations in the pre-modern Islamic period has portrayed them within the context of pederastic relationships/encounters. For more on pederasty in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire, see Boone’s *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*.

Raven and the Falcon: Youth versus Old Age in Medieval Arabic Literature, published in 2014, explores these same questions and concerns surrounding the complexity and pervasiveness of age stratification in homoerotic encounters based on age, rather than gender.\(^{26}\)

Hasan Shuraydi, author of The Raven and the Falcon, points to Abū Nawās as the “paradigm of pederasty” for being one of the first, and most prominent, poets to compose pederastic prose in the Islamic literary tradition.\(^ {27}\) He continues by asserting that, “The ‘Abbāsid dynasty was established by the Khurāsānian troops, among whom liwāt (sodomy) was prevalent on account of their association with ghilmān (boys). ‘Abbāsid poets therefore began to compose love poetry that centered on boys.”\(^ {28}\) This assumption, however, conflicts with Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male (fig. 1); there is a distinct role reversal that counters these established cultural assumptions as the younger male is seen to be mounting the older figure. It is here, in this supposed pictorial anomaly, that cultural conventions are revealed to be much more complex and complicated than traditional literature would originally assume. Is the artist attempting to comment on the older male’s sexual submission and thus his overall sexual virility, or perhaps his more reprehensible role in this particular encounter? I correlate this commentary to pre-modern Ottoman/Islamic social constructs that associated the penetrated partner with a weaker/effeminate role, with the worse offenders being “mature men who took that passive role.”\(^ {29}\)

In Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male (fig. 1), the uncontestably younger male is placed in the active role leaving the older male in the passive feminized role.

\(^{26}\) Hasan Shuraydi, The Raven and the Falcon: Youth versus Old Age in Medieval Arabic Literature (Leiden: BRILL, 2014), 99-120.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 120.

\(^{28}\) Ibid.

It is in the feminization of the male that much of the perceived sin associated with homosexuality is derived within the sociocultural Islamic context both in the early modern period and still today. Yet, as witnessed in the magnified image, the figure retains a smile on his face (fig. 3). I would suggest that the bearded figure happily associated himself with who Afsaneh Najmabadi terms “mukhannas” (an adult man desiring to be an object of desire for other adult men). However, this term has been suggested to carry a severe cultural stigma within Islamic societies that continues to be present even today. In his text *Sexual Relations in Iran*, Willem Floor posits potential reasoning that generates such taboo affiliations:

> For a man to admit he actually likes, derives pleasure from, being the passive partner, - to be penetrated, was ‘inexplicable, and could only be attributed to pathology.’ It was for this reason that the synonyms (in particular the Arabic ones) used for ‘to sodomize’ all tend to have abusive, derogatory and violent connotations. There is no sense at all for reciprocity, tenderness or love.

Herein lies the profound frustration and complexity currently defining the historical understanding of homoerotic encounters in pre-modern Islamic cultures. In considering that even the etymological roots of numerous terms used to describe homosexual encounters are infused with negative and even violent connotations, one quickly understands that all potential readings of who and what homosexuality were in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire are skewed towards bias and misrepresentation.

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31 Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 3. While there is not enough time or space to further elaborate on the fascinating discourses surrounding research in Islamic queer and gender theory, it must be stated that the sociocultural constructs were intrinsically linked to each illustration’s representation. I hope to pursue these theoretical considerations in my future research.

32 Floor, 299.
Were there words to describe loving and mutually enjoyed homoerotic experiences and/or relationships—or did such words simply never exist in the Arabic or Turkish vernacular?

The figures in the Khamsa’s scene (fig. 1) are not only depicted in a “non-traditional” reversed homoerotic situation, but are also revealed to be enjoying their unorthodox, risqué rendezvous proving that such positive, relished encounters did exist, at least for the participants on the outskirts of the communities’ imposed morality. Thus, this illustration exposes the complexity and breadth encompassed by historical homosexual encounters within the Ottoman Empire. So too, this illustration stands as a testament that homoerotic representations are “never solely one-directional but move along multiple, and sometimes contradictory vectors simultaneously.”

The presence of the older male’s smile arguably reveals a resistance to the social norms expected of an Ottoman male in the eighteenth-century. The authentic individual experiences that can be understood between the limited lines of literature and visual art also possibly indicate that those identified as mukhannas may have not been as socially stigmatized as the literature of the period has led modern scholars to believe. This new potential for more authentic historical interpretations of erotic experiences in the eighteenth-century is further supported in a second image from the Hamse-I Atayi.

Young Male Being Used by Group (fig. 2) portrays a much more intensely homoerotic scene than the previous image. The viewer notices the same patterning and floral ornamentation on the walls, floors, and doorframe. The color palette (perhaps due to the available reproduction) is considerably darkened and less brightly displayed. The same level of detail is given to the scene, including the unique facial

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33 Boone, 22.
34 Floor, 301.
structures and facial hair. In this image, however, the viewer witnesses a few diversions from the Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male (fig. 1). Firstly, the scene is far more invigorated by the inclusion of multiple sexual participants. In the center of the image, the viewer sees a similar scenario of an older adult male mounting a reclining hairless youth as seen in traditional homoerotic imagery. The central figures are elevated and enclosed by a railing, creating a stage-like or “to-be-looked-at” quality. This theatrical aspect is enhanced by the voyeuristic participation of the three other males in both the foreground and background. The figure in the foreground sits outside the action, contently, but physically separated from the erotic scene. Though he is removed, he plays an equally engaged role in the erotic experience by pleasuring himself as a voyeur below. However, his back is turned towards the couple, and in fact, he is facing out towards the gaze of the viewer suggesting that this particular image, more so than Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male, was intended to titillate and engross the viewer within the voyeuristic scene.

Similarly, one might consider the position of the two men above the scene to be correspondingly detached from the erotic experience, but I would suggest that the posturing implies something much more dynamic taking place. Both men in the background are focally engaging each other. This direct eye contact is highly unusual in Ottoman homoerotic representations. The locking eyes of the two standing males suggest that whether or not these figures are waiting for their turn on the young male, they are equally interested and aroused by each other and the erotic situation in which they have been placed. This communally inclusive element is further realized in contemplating the open door centering the focal point of the entire scene. This is no mere artistic embellishment, however. Not only does this invoke the viewer as a

35 Boone, 72.
voyeuristic participant in this sexual encounter, but I would also further attribute this open entryway as speaking to the larger social positioning of the homosexual subcultures in pre-modern Istanbul as both private and public (or at least, communal). An open portal to the public outside not only allows those within the scene access to the outside public realm but reversibly, the public has equally gained access to the not-so-private orgy. This subtle inclusion of the entryway, much like the passive partner’s smile (fig. 1), profoundly transforms our understanding of how homoerotic experiences in the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire were actually experienced. In *Young Male Being Used by Group* (fig. 2), the artist has given indication of three distinct and separate sexual experiences within a single scene. By doing this, he has broadened any preconceived perceptions that previously limited homosexual encounters to strictly structured experiences of pederasty. Each of these images complicates and broadens our understanding, revealing multiple layers of the historically authentic lives of males engaging in homoerotic experiences in the pre-modern Ottoman Empire. The inclusion of multiple participatory figures substantiates that homoerotic encounters were no longer solely relegated to the private realms of literature and secrecy. This point coincides with another substantial and overlooked figurative component that I will now return to by further analyzing *Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male* (fig. 1).

In the previous analysis of *Male Youth* (fig. 1), I did not mention the conspicuous presence of a band of six figures playing instruments at the top left side of the illustration. However, with a new awareness of the inclusion of the public space within the private erotic space, the presence of this orchestra takes on a new and revolutionary dimension. In her article “Mahremiyet: Mahrumiyetin Resmi (Privacy: 36 Examples being: the solo masturbation at the bottom center, the main couple copulating on the railed platform, and the voyeuristic mutual masturbation of the standing males.
The Picture of Deprivation),” Artan uses an almost identically stylized image from another reproduction of the Hamse-I Atayi (fig. 4). Again, the viewer witnesses a seemingly younger male taking the active-dominant role of the penetrator, which suggests that this similar image is referencing the same portion of prose in the Khamsa in fig. 1. The only age distinction attributed to the passive partner is evident in the thin, long mustache and dark shading on the subject’s face. Perhaps the absence of the full beard might have been the artist’s personal inflection alluding to the passive partner’s effeminate demeanor, much like the suggested ‘smile’ may have functioned for the bearded figure in Male Youth (fig. 1).37 In Artan’s image depicting the same scene, however, there is also an orchestra of nine watching the action unfold (fig. 4). Artan indicates the orchestra as having gathered from the surrounding community in an attempt to interrupt and call attention to the lascivious sexual encounter of the copulating pair.38 Thus, the orchestra’s presence in this image is a direct indication of the Khamsa’s social disapproval of such homosexual encounters within Ottoman society in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. This moral connotation applied to the context of the scene, however, interestingly adds another level of interchange between the public and private spheres.

In these two scenes, the viewer also becomes aware of a second ‘penetration’ happening as the public space is forcibly injected into the private sphere of the amorous males.39 Artan states that the Hamse-I Atayi was created with the specific purpose of highlighting stories and experiences from daily life representing the

37 Murray and Roscoe, 12-15.
39 Here I must acknowledge my sincere gratitude for the guidance of Dr. Esra Akin-Kivanc and her recommended scholarship pertaining to sexuality and the city-space and the perceived penetration of public life into the private sphere (October 2014).
cultural climate of Istanbul. Additionally, *Khamsa* was meant to provide a commentary on Istanbul’s alleged moral decline with other scenes remarking on the perceived lack of morals, thievery, lies, and briberies that plagued the city’s population. In this manner, the portion of the population that engaged in homosexual relations was both highlighted and condemned along with thieves, murderers, and the unjust. It is through these same considerations that Artan correlates homosexuality (or the population that engaged in homosexual encounters) and the subculture’s negative visual representations with having directly emerged out of the transforming eighteenth-century cosmopolitan city-space as witnessed in the illustrations of various versions of the *Hamse-I Atayi*. While I agree with Artan that the creation and illustration of the *Hamse-I Atayi* undoubtedly gave visibility to the marginalized homoerotic subcultures of pre-modern Istanbul, I do however wish to refute her claim that the homosexual subcultures emerged solely due to the transforming city environment, further reinforcing my argument demanding further investigation into the lived experiences of men and women experiencing same-sex encounters during, and before, the early modern age.

**Cross-Cultural Comparisons.**

In her same article, “Mahremiyet: Mahrumiyetin Resmi (Privacy: The Picture of Deprivation),” Artan argues that due to the changing nature of the city-space in eighteenth-century Istanbul, the immoral behaviors of the private sector soon integrated with the public sphere allowing people to test the social boundaries of love, belief, and morality. The new urban city-space quickly became associated with the

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40 Artan, “Mahremiyet,” 92-93.
41 Ibid., 93-99.
42 Ibid., 93-95.
Iniquitous and decadent hidden lives of Istanbul’s inhabitants, which Artan parallels with the eighteenth-century cosmopolitan cities of Europe including Florence, London, and Paris. In these newly transforming city-spaces, Artan connects an identical emergence of homoerotic behavior and visibility with emerging city life due to the construction of public parks, theaters, coffee houses, and public baths. Likewise, the emergence of homoerotic imagery during the eighteenth-century in Istanbul and Europe was due in large part to the rapidly increasing unfavorable social views concerning homosexual male experiences. Artan’s assessment can be observed in both images of the male youth penetrating an adult male (fig. 1 and fig. 4), as the presence of the band is included to “incite shame” upon the licentious scenes. While it does become evident in these illustrations that the public life was penetrating into the, until then, private (secret) sphere of the erotically engaged men, one also needs to further consider Artan’s reasoning as to why homosexual representations were historically understood to have only become visible due to their increased association with the immoral.

In exploring Artan’s claims of emerging homosexual subcultures in other metropolitan cities around the globe, it is easier to understand her reasoning behind correlating negative sociocultural perceptions to homosexual subcultures in Istanbul when examining images from Europe, specifically France, which shared political ties with the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. Artan is not alone in her stance suggesting that the emergence of homophobia within Islamic

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43 Ibid., 96. Artan references the scholarship of Richard Sennett attempting to correlate Istanbul’s societal transformations with those of European capital cities including Florence, Paris, and London. Other scholars, including Murray and Roscoe, also reference these same societal transformations and the “decadence” of the early modern Ottoman Empire as a primary factor used to define the emergence of homosexual visual representations.
44 Ibid., 97-98.
46 Ibid., 103-104.
47 Ibid., 100-104.
cultures was related to cross-cultural contact between the Ottoman East and European West.\textsuperscript{48} Scholar Vincenzo Patanè reinforces Artan’s position suggesting, “the moralism and hypocrisy of bourgeois class in Europe contributed to the homophobia of the Ottoman’s during the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{49} Thus, this perpetuated singular interpretation is possibly where the emerging city-space and the growing exposure of homoerotic imagery in pre-modern Ottoman society became intrinsically linked in Artan’s argument. While I do not agree with this simplified generalization as to the emergence of unique subcultures around the world, numerous images from the same time period compellingly mirror the same moral denunciations of homoerotic encounters in France.

Several contemporaneous eighteenth-century French representations of male homosexual encounters were created in order to comment on the perceived moral degradation that homosexual subcultures perpetuated within Parisian society. The first engraving, taken from a French satirical tract in 1793, depicts two Parisian males “taking advantage of stormy night” (fig. 5).\textsuperscript{50} Though elusive, this tract reveals negative opinions concerning the existence of homosexual subcultures within the Parisian cultural cityscape. The second engraving, similar in context and taken from a 1790 Revolutionary French pamphlet (fig. 6), more blatantly warns of what impending disasters await such depraved participants of immoral homosexual encounters.\textsuperscript{51} Here, the engaged couple goes about their sexual tryst while the unattended stove has set the house on fire, endangering their lives and those of the equally immoral canines in the foreground of the image. This scene was chosen most

\textsuperscript{48} Murray and Roscoe, 14-15. Murray and Roscoe claim that rising waves of homophobia within Arab cultures were a relatively new concept, having been “introduced by the Christian West.”

\textsuperscript{49} Patanè, “Homosexuality in the Middle East and North Africa,” 277.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 106.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 116.
likely to connect the viewer’s imagination to the fire and brimstone associated with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is in these connections to European homosexual subcultures that the eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire could be said to have negatively defined homosexual lived experiences in the modern age, but this was in no way the only possible social norm.

It is well-documented that homosexual experiences were culturally normative during different periods in the Ottoman Empire’s history, encompassing both spiritual and purely pleasurable encounters. In the centuries even before the first Ottoman sultan sat on the throne, homosexual encounters were culturally encouraged in the Islamic world as early as 1082 CE. One example promoting homosexual encounters can be found in the great Persian poetry of Kai Ka’us ibn Iskandar entitled *Mirror for Princes*. The writings, intended for Iskandar’s son, act as a type of life primer, discussing topics of ethics and social advice—including dining etiquette, raising children, and social expectations of various occupations such as merchants and poets. He advises: “as between women and male youths, do not confine your inclinations to either sex… find enjoyment from both kinds.” He further suggests that his son perhaps be more “inclined in the summer months towards boys and during the winter towards women.” This nonchalant proposal subtly underlies the normality of such considerations during the late medieval period towards homosexual liaisons. I propose, however, that these same mundane considerations concerning male-to-male sex never truly disappeared from Islamic cultures, including the pre-modern Ottoman Empire.

52 Christiane Bird, *Neither East Nor West: One Woman’s Journey through the Islamic Republic of Iran* (New York: Pocket Books, 2001), 379.
53 Spencer, 104.
54 Ibid.
In her most recent publication, Artan reproduces a mesmerizing Ottoman illustration depicting a group of men penetrating each other while standing in a circular formation (fig. 7). While we lack documentary information on this illustration beyond its title, *Homoerotic Scene*, the mere existence of such a depiction suggests that homoerotic representations were created for much more than satirical or metaphorical purposes. In the final years of the Empire, Ottoman society would witness an increased cultural censorship, and outright hostility, towards homosexuality, including legal sanctions that outlawed and openly persecuted individuals who participated in such encounters.\(^{55}\) With such a multilayered and complicated socio-historical timespan, it is vital to approach homoerotic representations from a broader lens that does not limit other potential interpretations of the lives of early modern same-sex relationships and encounters. These historical fluctuations between tolerance and intolerance, indifference and endorsement, further complicate our understanding of erotic experiences in Ottoman society beyond simple bilateral interpretations that demand further consideration.\(^{56}\)

**Conclusion.**

While I have found tremendous evidence for a far more vast range of same-sex experiences that existed in the early modern Islamic world, there still remain numerous questions for future consideration that will prompt further research. Why in Istanbul, a cosmopolitan city in the eighteenth-century, did such negative stances towards homosexuality evolve, especially considering the Ottoman Empire’s former tolerance of such erotic same-sex relationships? Were these negative social views generated by Istanbul’s emerging social self-awareness and a potential need to define

\(^{55}\) Patanè, 277, and Smalls, 143.

\(^{56}\) Spencer, 106.
Ottoman society against European standards? Are there any stories or images of homosexual relationships that move beyond the focus of the physical sex act that dominated eighteenth-century Ottoman visual representations to represent romantic love rather than physical pleasure (fig. 8)? Or are we too far removed, as modern researchers, from the theories, concepts of gender and identity, and societal constructs that shaped individuals of the pre-modern Ottoman Empire? In the final stages of this research, I reached out to Dr. James Smalls in an attempt to identify one of the images discussed in this study. Mentioning that I had previously contacted the Turkish and Islamic Arts Museum in Istanbul and had not received a response, he replied saying:

I am not surprised that your inquiries to them have gone unanswered, for they are not especially proud of this aspect of their history, particularly at this highly conservative contemporary moment in that part of the world.

In this final consideration, I am curious to know how many more images still remain unseen, unexamined, or merely forgotten due to the contemporary whim that finds such discomfiture in the wonderfully illustrated representations hidden away in their reserves. For now, I will momentarily rest my search for the beloved until a future passion and pursuit are formed.

57 Floor, 301. Willem Floor in one of his passages fleetingly mentions historical texts that convey stories of ‘gay couples’ cohabitating in what would be closer to a modern day, albeit Western, conceptualization of homosexual identity. Yet, this brief singular line is left unattended in and ripe for further research.

58 Quoted from an email correspondence with Dr. James Smalls on December 9th, 2014.
Fig. 1. Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male, Anonymous. Illustration in Nev’izâde Atâyi’s Khamsa (mid-eighteenth-century). Reproduced in James Smalls’s Gay Art, 2008.

Fig. 3. Magnified portion of *Male Youth Penetrating Adult Male*, Anonymous. Illustration in Nev’îzâde Atâyi’s *Khamsa* (mid-eighteenth-century).
Fig. 4. Anonymous illustration from *Hamse-I Atavi*, eighteenth-century; Istanbul. Image from Tül Artan’s article “Mahremiyet: Mahrumiyetin Resmi (Privacy: The Picture of Deprivation),” *Defter* 20 (Summer 1993): 103.
Fig. 5. Pair of engravings from *The Cloistered Whores*, 1793; Satirical tract. From the Bibliothèque National, Paris.

Fig. 6. *The Little Buggers of the Riding School*, 1790; French Revolutionary pamphlet, engraving. From the Bibliothèque National, Paris.
Fig. 7. Homoerotic scene, from a manuscript of *Rūjūʾ al-Shaykh ilā Sibāh*, Istanbul, around 1799, gouache on paper, 21.7 x 11.8 cm; Collection of Mony Vibescu, Paris. Photo: Gilles Berquet. *Colored image found online, includes my personal edit (upper right corner) omitting added text from previous posting.*

Fig. 8. *Shah Abbas I with Page*, 1627; Persian; ink, gouache, and silver on paper, 25.5 x 15 cm; Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Bibliography:


The Immortal, the Undead, and the Monster:
Flagellation and Abjection in Lebanese Shi‘i Discourses of Resistance

Miranda Meyer
M.A. Student
Center for Contemporary Arab Studies
Georgetown University

Abstract
Shi‘i Muslim identity has undergone a massive, well-documented shift in the last half-century, a shift toward activism which has been accompanied by changes in discourse, religious practice, politics, and daily life. Over the same period, rejection of “flagellation” (i.e. tatbir and latm, or haidar) has become near-unanimous among Shi‘i clerics, yet there has been little investigation of how this phenomenon relates to modern Shi‘i identity. I employ Lara Deeb’s concept of the “pious Shi‘i modern” in Lebanon to analyze the relationships between the discourses of martyrdom and of anti-flagellation in the community of pious Lebanese Shi’a. Tracing the history of flagellation anxiety in Lebanon from its 1920s emergence among elites to its flowering among a broader public beginning in the 1970s, I note the affiliation of non-flagellatory Ashura practices with Hizballahi politics and with veneration of Sayyid Fadlallah; I then analyze Fadlallah’s words regarding flagellation alongside those of Hizballah’s Sayyid Nasrallah regarding martyrdom. I conclude that while martyrdom is the aspirational icon for this community of Shi’a, flagellation is its image of abjection. In anti-flagellation discourse, anxieties about modernity, activism, identity, and dignity intertwine to outline the abject self. This abject self presents a spectacle of meaninglessness, embodied in a flagellant who focuses on performing his own pain rather than the broader communal struggle for correctitude. Drawing additionally on Laleh Khalili’s work on the image of the humanitarian victim, the paper delineates an embodied universe of subject, object, and abject that defines the self-conception of the pious Shi‘i modern.

Key Words: Abjection, Ashura, Fadlallah, Flagellation, Hizballah, Lebanon, Martyrdom, Nasrallah, Shi‘ism.
We can take these massacres and smear our faces and clothes with the blood of its victims, rue our fate, and use this blood to spread despair, depression, and fear in the people’s hearts, and kill their hope. […] At the same time, we can take this massacre, paint our beards, faces and clothes with its blood, and turn it into anger, revolution, and determination, and a witness to the impasse in which the enemy finds itself.

—Sayyid Hasan Nasrallah, 2002

It is tempting for outsiders to assume that the bloody forms of flagellation associated with Ashura, the Shi’i holiday commemorating the Battle of Karbala, somehow precede, represent, explain, or contribute to the use of suicide bombing by Shi’i groups in Lebanon against French, American, and Israeli presences. Suicide bombing, appearing unthinkably bizarre, is seen as part of a “culture of death,” an obsession with death, an inexplicable disregard for one’s own life or those of one’s fellows. The tactic has become indelibly associated with “Islamic extremism,” and some Shi’a’s willingness to flay one’s own back open, or bleed to the point of passing out, as part of a religious ritual is easily elided into another example of the “culture of death.” Meanwhile, some studies have contributed to a perception of the Shi’a in particular as possessed by a “suicidal” impulse or “martyr complex.”

This is all manifestly untrue. Suicide attacks have been carried out by non-Shi’i and non-Muslim groups within and outside the Middle East; neither Islam nor Shi’i Islam has any exclusive claim on the tactic. The Shi’i organization best known for and most credited with suicide bombing, Hizballah, bans Ashura flagellations and

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4 Alagha, Hizbullah’s Identity Construction, 92.
5 Ibid., 107-111.
discourages them when it can. The majority of Shi‘i mujtahids, or religious interpreters, disapprove of such practices or ban them outright. If there is any relationship between self-harm rituals on Ashura and suicide bombing, it is not one of predilection.

To place them in binary opposition would be as lazy as arranging them on a spectrum. Certainly it would be easy to say that both are forms of religiously motivated violence, one oriented inward to the self and one outward to the world, and be done with it. However, such a statement would require ignoring a great deal of salient information as well as the most basic understanding of what “suicide” operations and “flagellation” signify for Shi‘i Muslims. In fact, when these ideological and discursive fields are examined, it becomes clear that the relation between the two is one of rejection, repulsion: the discourse of martyrdom repudiates flagellation as the territory of the abject. It is my intention to show that examining the discourse of rejection of flagellation reveals a flipside or underbelly to the growth of discourses of martyrdom and resistance in Shi‘i Lebanon: while the latter is demonstrative of what its users want to embrace and project, the former is that which they seek to reject and recess. In placing anti-flagellation discourse in conversation with the language of resistance, we open a window into the particular form of abjection that haunts pious Shi‘i self-conception, the monstrous self that must be cast out.

Essentially, the arguments for martyrdom/resistance and against flagellation are two discursive channels or “arms” that hinge on the same fulcrum of personhood. Mediated by a modernizing vision of an individual with interiority and agency, a long-running contestation over flagellation first among elites and then a broader

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public has interacted with values of dignity, efficacy, rational restraint, and life (vitality, humanity) itself, which are simultaneously essential to discourses of martyrdom and resistance. The latter, in turn, have emerged from the political mobilization of Shi’a in Lebanon and the surrounding region over the course of the twentieth-century and the accompanying reinterpretation of Ashura, or the Karbala narrative. The two conversations interpenetrate so closely that it can sometimes be difficult to pull them apart: when a cleric speaks of dignity in reference to celebrating Ashura, its undignified and abject opposite is the flagellant; when a politician speaks of dignity in reference to living Ashura (that is, according to the mobilized religious paradigm), its opposite is the humiliation of colonization.  

This complex interrelation between flagellation and resistance is best discovered by examining the divergence in Lebanese Ashura practices apparent by the early 2000s, and examining its roots in the contestation of flagellation, the discourse of modernity, and the revolutionized Karbala narrative that emerged from Iran’s Islamic Revolution and found a home in the Lebanese Movement of the Deprived.

It is important to note here that I am discussing the community constituting what Lara Deeb has termed “the pious Shi’i modern,” meaning politically mobilized and religiously committed Lebanese Shi’a clustered in Beirut’s Shi’a-heavy suburbs (al-dahiyya) and in Jabal ‘Amil (the country’s southern region). These individuals may be directly affiliated with Hizballah in one way or another, or they may not; but they are part of a larger community that Hizballah and, as we will see, the mujtahid Ayatollah Sayyid Muhammad Fadlallah typify and express in multiple ways (though

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7 Even the dividing line between cleric and politician is slippery here, since Shi’i clerics comment on political matters and figures such as Hizballah’s Hasan Nasrallah are also technically clerics. I implied categorical separation above for the sake of clarifying the two “arms” of discourse I wish to discuss: the explicitly political (framed using religion) and the explicitly religious (suffused with politics).

not identically). While I am most concerned here with the discursive level of events, it must be remembered that most of the phenomena under discussion do not apply universally to Shi‘a or even to Lebanese Shi‘a. Conversely, while some scholars have observed an intermingling of Sunni and Shi‘i jurisprudence and politics in Palestinian borrowings of Hizballah’s tactics, suggesting that the discursive realm under discussion has implications beyond the “pious modern” community, these are outside the scope of this particular paper. Rather, this is an investigation of a particular nexus of ideas, converging through the twentieth-century on the Lebanese Shi‘a, around that eternal question of how to be a person: how to be a good Shi‘i, a responsible community member, a resistive subject rather than a colonized object, a civilized individual rather than a backward traditionalist. Facing this struggle is the constant, if not fully articulated, fear of the abject self: the monstrous reflection.

In creating this nexus, discourses of modernity, activism, resistance, rationalism, correctitude, dignity, and religious practice have created clusters of oppositions that are nearly impossible to separate from one another: try to discuss one and another pops up. Due to this entanglement or nesting of values, I have chosen to approach the investigation as a series of examinations of “clusters” rather than imposing a sequence of causality (e.g., that dignity discourse creates an emphasis on self-control which in turn renders ecstatic religious behavior distasteful). These discursive struggles have all coexisted and acted on one another, and to trace the precise pathways among them would take a much larger project. I will begin by outlining the significance of Ashura commemorations and two different styles

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10 The normative opposition between “civilized” and “backward” or “traditional” is a concern present within this community’s navigation of identity (as within many), as evidenced by Deeb’s work and others; I mention it not to endorse it as a factual valuation of better and worse but rather to set the scene of the debate. For the people for whom these practices—resistance, flagellation, etc.—have immediate meaning, this idea of moving away from a “backward” past is important.
observed in Lebanon in the early 2000s, and then establish the background of contestation over flagellation. I then move through the oppositions that have framed this contestation as these ideologies have developed. Martyrdom discourse, which has been elaborated at length elsewhere,\(^\text{11}\) will be interwoven throughout as the other “arm,” the positive of which flagellation is the negative; the superego to which flagellation is the abject.\(^\text{12}\)

“Living Ashura,” or the Karbala paradigm.

Ashura marks the anniversary of the Battle of Karbala, in which Husayn, the third Imam and grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, stood up against those who would take the line of succession of authority over Muslims away from his family. He was brutally slaughtered along with his male family members and companions, the women and children of the party captured and humiliated.\(^\text{13}\) Karbala is the central narrative of Shi‘i thought, and much of the literature interprets its pre-twentieth-century existence as a quietist tradition in which believers accept suffering in the present (in the footsteps of Husayn, and in solidarity with him) in anticipation of reward in the hereafter.\(^\text{14}\) However, historical examinations of Ashura practices—

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\(^\text{13}\) For a brief but evocative description of the events of Karbala, see Majed Halawi, *A Lebanon Defied: Musa al-Sadr and the Shi’a Community* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992), 167-170.

\(^\text{14}\) Ende, for example, suggests that the rituals as they existed in early 20\(^{th}\)-century Iraq served the interests of local political and economic elites by reinforcing popular loyalty to them through mass identification with Shi‘i traditions, particularly the authority of the Imams and its lesser personifications in prominent religious scholars—who tended to be connected to political and business interests by family. See Werner Ende, “The Flagellations of Muharram and the Shi‘ite ‘Ulama’,” in *Der Islam* 55 (1), 1978: 20-36; also Emrys L. Peters, “Aspects of Rank and Status Among Muslims in a Lebanese Village,” in *People and Culture of the Middle East*, ed. L.E. Sweet (Garden City: Natural History Press, 1970), 76-123. More general examples of this interpretation include Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in*
sometimes the very same works that present the quietist thesis—reveal that it also has a history of communal self-assertion, whether through sectarian, ethnic, or other forms of self-conception. Certainly the efforts by various authorities to repress, encourage, ban, or institutionalize public Ashura rituals suggest that these rulers understood them to have political valence that could be interpreted as a threat or a field for cooptation. In both interpretations, Ashura commemorations—consisting, after centuries of development, of processions, reenactments of the battle, and readings of the history and its meaning for Shi’i’a today—serve to reproduce and reify the social world as the communities performing them understand it.

This longstanding function of Ashura has taken on new meaning in the last few decades. The development of revolutionary Shi’i thought in Iranian opposition movements in the 1960s and ‘70s, reappropriated to the Lebanese Shi’a’s Movement of the Deprived over the same period, recast Karbala as not merely an occasion for weeping but rather as a call to action. The Movement’s leader, imam Musa al-Sadr, gave a famous speech in 1974: “Do not allow [Ashura] ceremonies or lamentation to serve as a substitute for action. We must transform the ceremonies into a spring from which revolutionary fury and constructive protest will gush forth.” This version of


15 For example, Nakash asserts that “The religious fervor created by the processions always had the potential to lead to Shi’i-Sunni strife or anti-government protest,” though what precisely this means is not detailed. See Nakash, “Origin of the Rituals,” 169. See also Gokhan Çetinsaya, “The Ottoman View of the Shiite Community of Iraq in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in _The Other Shiites_, op. cit., 19-40.  

16 The interplay of the Iranian and Lebanese movements is laid out in detail in Halawi, _A Lebanon Defied_.  

17 Quoted in Sabrina Mervin, “‘Ashura’: Some Remarks on Ritual Practices in Different Shiite Communities,” in _The Other Shiites_, op. cit., 137-148.
the message of Ashura has been elaborated and entrenched in the ensuing decades as an essential pillar of the “authentication” of religion for the population of pious, mobilized Lebanese Shi’a whose thinking Deeb has explored. From the perspective of those implicated in authentication, religious thought and behavior is seen as having a “before” of automatic, unreasoned traditionalism, rife with folkloric impurities and historical inaccuracies, and a “now” of conscious, conscientious, and activist praxis:

When the myths were stripped away and only the authentic historical record remained, the liberatory message of Ashura was highlighted. Authentic history demonstrated that the battle and martyrdom of the Imam took place in a context of revolution. As understood by pious Shi’i Muslims, the revolution of Imam Husayn was a moral revolution, one in which the fundamental lesson was that one must always stand up to one’s oppressor and that only through resistance is freedom possible.18

With this understanding, the “lessons from the school of Imam Husayn”19 infuse every aspect of life. Karbala is everywhere and at every time; the opportunity to fight oppression is ever-present.20

This way of seeing the world translates directly into the imperative to be active, which for pious Shi’a, since the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon in 1982, has become synonymous with working for the Islamic Resistance. (Israel has very explicitly been cast as Yazid, the usurper who cut Husayn down.21) This imperative means different things for different people depending on age, gender, inclination, and ability,22 but Hizballah’s wide array of organizations, as well as the proliferation of community service groups outside its purview that nonetheless contribute to the same goals, means that there is a place for everyone.

The opposite of the “authentic” and active Shi’i is the “traditional” and passive

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19 Ibid., 127.
one. This is a person who understands Ashura as simply an occasion for shedding tears for the sake of salvation—even, perhaps, merely expressing his or her own personal grief. (That this grief may be directly related to the Resistance through loss of a loved one does not ameliorate its myopia in the eyes of authenticated religion.) Such “impure”23 practice can be found in traditional forms of any type of Ashura ritual, but the flagellant personifies it.

**Contesting flagellation: the case against haidar.**

What I have been referring to thus far as “flagellation” is in fact a wider set of practices. From long before any ritual involving blood found its way into Ashura commemorations, beating one’s breast has been a feature;24 in the late seventeenth-century, more extreme ways of expressing grief in processions began to appear, finding their way to Nabatiyya in Jabal ‘Amil in the late nineteenth-century.25 These consisted of zanjil, or beating one’s back with some form of chains; and tatbir, the making of a small cut on the forehead which one beats with one’s hands or the flat of a blade while marching to encourage bleeding.26 Going forward, I will refer to these forms of flagellation as haidar, following the contemporary colloquial Lebanese term “hitting haidar” for such acts.27 These practices, ecstatic in their affect and sometimes

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23 This is Fadlallah’s term (see ibid., 130), but as will become apparent it has historic resonances regarding correctitude in Ashura practice and specifically the shedding of blood.
26 Nakash, “The Muharram Rituals,” 122. Terminology varies a great deal among documentations (see also Deeb, Norton, Ende, and Mervin), but the descriptions of the actual practices are highly consistent.
27 *Haidar* means “lion” and is itself an epithet for Husayn; no doubt the term “hitting haidar” follows from its practitioners’ tendency to call out the word while in the process. Deeb, *An Enchanted Modern*, 134.
carried out to the point of passing out or even, in some reports, death,\textsuperscript{28} were contested almost immediately upon their arrival.\textsuperscript{29} However, they entrenched and spread without serious challenge until the 1920s, when Sayyid Muhsin al-Amin (a native of Jabal ‘Amil, then resident of Damascus\textsuperscript{30}) published a polemic against them and touched off an intense debate among clerical (and to some degree, political) authorities.

Al-Amin’s distaste for haidar was manifold. He considered it bida’ (incorrect innovation in religious practice); he thought it immodest, as it was practiced by men partially or fully naked from the waist up in view of women; he felt it dishonored the community in the eyes of outsiders; and he argued it was haram (religiously forbidden) because the Qur’an prohibits self-harm.\textsuperscript{31} It is essential to note, however, that this critique was not a specific attack on haidar but rather part of a generalized project to reform Ashura practices. Al-Amin wanted to codify, purify, and standardize Ashura rituals, which meant that he wanted to be sure they spread a commendable moral doctrine; he wanted to make them historically accurate; he wanted to create institutions to educate a new generation of readers for majalis (gatherings to hear the story of the battle and its meaning) who would read it in proper Arabic and understand it correctly so as to propagate the Message.\textsuperscript{32} In short, he wanted to

\textsuperscript{28} While Norton contends that there are no reports of anyone dying, some of the histories of Ashura practices refer to it happening (e.g. Nakash); the secondary literature does not seem to agree one way or another.


\textsuperscript{30} Mervin, Un reformisme chiite.


\textsuperscript{32} See in particular Mervin, Un reformisme chiite; Weiss, “The Cultural Politics of Shi’i Modernism.”
modernize Ashura. His opponents, notably Sayyid ‘Abd al-Husayn Sadiq of Nabatiyya (who had actually encouraged the adoption of haidar there\(^33\)), argued that such rituals helped bring people together and promote solidarity across class and educational boundaries, that history need not be subject to the same rigorous scientific standards as jurisprudence, and that as Shi’a were not in general all Arabic speakers, the use of colloquial tongues in majalis should be permitted.\(^34\) Meanwhile, several mujtahids in Najaf objected to al-Amin’s critique so strongly that they pushed the debate out of the realm of elites and into the streets, portraying him and those who agreed with him as “Umayyads” to their constituents and stirring up resentment against them. The prevailing thinking is that the authorities in Najaf in particular found the spectacle of haidar beneficial economically (for the tourists it attracted) and politically (as part of the quietist tradition) and so found in al-Amin a more material threat.\(^35\)

Al-Amin’s broader effort to modernize Ashura is of interest because of its strong connections with authenticated Ashura practice. As Deeb has detailed, an authenticated majlis prioritizes clear speech and pedagogical aims over emotionality, and is less likely to borrow poetry from Iraqi traditions; al-Amin’s concern over self-harm was itself part of the modernizing shift toward “promoting an individualist ethic that chimed, ‘The most important thing is the protection of the self.’”\(^36\) This interest in self-interest, combined with the emphasis on education in order to spread “correct” religion, echoes contemporary authenticated Islam’s emphasis on self-improvement in

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\(^34\) Ibid. It is not clear from the secondary literature whether al-Sadiq supported linguistic pluralism explicitly out of the desire to promote pan-Shi‘a solidarity, but given his argument about processions it seems likely there was at least implicit connection.
\(^35\) Ende, “Flagellations,” 29-30. On these events as a power struggle among elite ulama’ and wujaha’ families, see Halawi, A Lebanon Defied, 90-91.
\(^36\) Weiss, “The Cultural Politics of Shi‘i Modernism,” 253 (quoting directly from al-Amin’s response to his critics).
religion: one of the features of the pious modern is the idea that “religion is a ladder” that a person is always climbing, striving to better him- or herself.\(^{37}\)

This contestation over correctitude and modernization in Ashura at large was mostly limited to the elites, who argued it in a series of publications.\(^{38}\) (While it seems likely that some of the emerging Shi‘i public was witness to it, as major journals at the time covered the debate,\(^{39}\) the “public-ness” of the incident was in its forum, not in its participants.) It reemerged in the mid-1970s among a much broader public as the revolutionized Karbala paradigm began to take hold,\(^{40}\) and while authenticated and traditional forms can be found in all Ashura celebrations, it is *haidar* that has become the centerpiece of the argument. The overwhelming majority of *mujtahids* are against it, and they reiterate their opposition every year before Ashura.\(^{41}\) Their reasoning includes the prohibition of self-harm, but often attention is paid to the perception of the Shi‘i community by outsiders and the question of motivations. That is to say, the *mujtahids* are primarily concerned not with the *haram* nature of the act of *haidar* itself, but with what it says about worshipers, both in the eyes of outsiders and in terms of their individual interiority. A person who engages in *haidar*, the thinking goes, is too caught up in grief and emotion; he is not thinking correctly about Ashura and what it means. If the message of Ashura is activism and revolution, then the response should not be to bleed in the street for no purpose, but rather to work for the cause.\(^{42}\)

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39 Ibid.
41 Norton, “Blood, Ritual, and Shiite Identity,” 147. “In fact, virtually every important Shi‘i cleric has condemned and forbidden [haidar] in recent years and issued fatawa…calling on Shiites to abjure from participating.” Numerous examples including Ayatollah Khamenei, Fadlallah, Mahdi Shams al-Din. See also Mervin, “Some Remarks,” 146, regarding a poll of clerics.
This value of efficacy is evident in the discourses and behaviors of pious Shi’ā as well as their leaders. Hizballah banned *haidar* in 1994 following a *fatwa* (religious edict) from Ayatollah Khamenei,⁴³ the group’s official religious guide, and has instituted blood drives in Nabatiyya and *al-dahiyya* as a way to enable those who desire to bleed for Husayn to do so *productively*.⁴⁴ (In perhaps the ultimate demonstration of the link between discouraging *haidar* and serving the Resistance, a school supervised by Sayyid Fadlallah in Damascus used to organize a similar drive and send the blood to Palestine.)⁴⁵ In place of *haidar*, Hizballah-organized processions on Ashura engage in a reformed form of *latm*, or breast-beating (henceforth *latm* will refer to this reformed practice) that is remarkable in its standardization and organization. In contrast to traditional processions:

They were either dressed uniformly as scouts or entirely in black…. Each group marched in three neat rows behind a microphone-bearing leader, who initiated *nudbas* [elegies] and chants, and ensured that everyone performed *laṭam* [sic] in perfect unison. This *laṭam* did not involve blood. Instead, those performing it swung both arms downwards, then up, then out away from their bodies, and finally in to strike their chests with their hands. It was done to a four-count rhythm so that on every fourth beat the sound of hands striking chests resonated loudly, providing a percussive accompaniment.⁴⁶ This form of praxis is “military” and “regimented,”⁴⁷ recalling of course Hizballah’s prominent role in the most direct form of Resistance. However, it is also highly rationalized: where *haidar* is unruly, messy, and requires paramedics,⁴⁸ *latm* is organized in space (rows of bodies) and time (rhythm). *Haidar* is an inward-facing experience, while *latm* unites individuals through uniform discipline of the body.

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While *haidar* is perceived by other Lebanese as “barbaric” or “backward,”* latm* is irreprensibly controlled and respectable. It communicates an interiority that is not selfish but communitarian, not willful but effective, not indulgently emotional but conscious of purpose. The *latm/haidar* opposition is the embodiment of the fulcrum of personhood to which I attached the two discursive “arms” of celebrating and practicing Ashura, or of religion and resistance.

I will now turn to the series of values and their inherent oppositions I introduced at the beginning of this article. In each case, I will demonstrate the correspondences between the discourse of *haidar* rejection and that of the Resistance along the axis of the value in question. The former will be represented primarily through the writings of Sayyid Fadlallah: while there are a number of *fatawa* from an array of clerics against the practice, his writings on the subject are a particularly useful diagnostic for this rejection’s characteristic anxieties. He is immensely well-respected, with a large following,* and Deeb has identified him as being “toward the far end of the authentication spectrum,”* meaning that his opinions serve as an ideal type of sorts. In addition to *fatawa*, Fadlallah has published a book collecting sermons and speeches on Ashura, which deals with *haidar* in detail.* To portray Resistance discourse, meanwhile, I will rely on Hizballah’s media activities, with particular attention to the words of Nasrallah as the group’s Secretary General and spokesperson.

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*49 Ibid., 136.
50 Ibid., 92-93. It is worth noting that Ayatollah Fadlallah died in 2010, though the period being dealt with in the paper ends just prior to this event (the 2000s). While his following has doubtless changed since his death (following a deceased marja’ is usually held to be *haram*), his role in shaping the discourses on the subject of *haidar* and the pious Shi’i modern in general during his life remains important.
51 Deeb, “Living Ashura,” 130.
Dignity / Humiliation / Abjection.

In *Ashoora: An Islamic Perspective*, Fadlallah asks, “Who among us does not see that in dignity lies the greatest value on both individual and social levels?” He poses this rhetorical question in the context of statements by Husayn regarding rejecting humiliation in the form of political injustice, a clear correspondence to the theme of dignity that runs throughout the revolutionary discourse of martyrdom:

The icon that both parties, secularists and Islamists, embraced is that martyrdom operations were conducted in order to uphold ‘izzat wa karamat al-umma or the honor, pride, and dignity of the ‘nation’; this being the main cause or motivation behind martyrdom operations.

Thus Nasrallah spoke of “the dignity of our homeland, and the self-esteem of our nation” on the occasion of Israel’s withdrawal in 2000, and insisted in 1997 on the occasion of the martyring of his own son that “We do not want to beg for peace and security” but rather “forge our nation’s peace…” The evocation of begging calls up another shade of dignity in Fadlallah’s work: the portrayal of the person of Husayn. While this is a separate ritual from that of *haidar-latm*, the image that Fadlallah seeks to banish—of Husayn crying out and begging for water as he dies, expiring in pathetic agony—is nonetheless connected to the image of the flagellant as abjection personified. Each is associated with “traditional” religious practice that privileges emotionality over reason (something Fadlallah vehemently seeks to reverse); each performs weakness in place of Husayn’s actual strength. As Fadlallah goes on to say in terms heavily referential to the flagellant,

[Husayn] withstood all cruel and hard consequences so as to manifest the important human values that God wanted for man in life, because the matter was not a matter of his self, but that of the Message in the

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54 Alagha, *Hizbullah’s Identity Construction*, 112.
56 Ibid., 174.
58 Fadlallah, *Ashoora*, more or less throughout, but see especially pp 27, 29, 30-31, and 35.
challenges it faces and its needs of standing firm and balanced in difficult times.\textsuperscript{59}

In this formulation, the opposite of dignity is not humiliation by an enemy but rather the abjection of the self through performed pathos. There is an echo here of the general anxiety regarding the perception of Shi’a that surfaced in al-Amin’s words and has only expanded onto a larger world stage in the intervening decades, and indeed the importance of not “dishonoring the sect” appears in Ashoora. Quoting Ayatollah Khoi (another popular marja’ and, incidentally, a teacher of Musa al-Sadr\textsuperscript{60}) on haidar, Fadlallah explains that it is prohibited if it “leads to dishonouring and belittlement” and adds that Khoi defined these calamities as “what leads to humiliation and the weakening of the sect in the eyes of the common norm.”\textsuperscript{61}

While this anxiety is articulated in terms of the outsider, it is ultimately an anxiety regarding the insiders, Shi’a themselves: I do not use the term “abject” lightly. As Julia Kristeva defined it, “what is abject…is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”\textsuperscript{62} Haidar has, as I have shown, been aggressively excluded, at times to the bewilderment of those who still espouse it;\textsuperscript{63} in this particular cluster of opposition, it becomes the “place where meaning collapses” in that the Message is lost amid shouts, blood, pain, tears, and even unconsciousness. Returning to the metaphor of the fulcrum, then, we can say that while dignity is consistently valued, its rejected opposite is humiliation (colonization), while its feared alternative is abjection (haidar), hinging entirely on the interiority of the individual.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 54. This idea of focusing on the self is explicitly connected to excessive emotion and flagellation elsewhere in the text.
\textsuperscript{60} Halawi, A Lebanon Defied, 126.
\textsuperscript{61} Khoi quoted in ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{62} Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 2.
\textsuperscript{63} See for example this video, in which haidar is praised vociferously and the speaker asks, “Why are you so frustrated with us?” YouTube: “Shia Bassim defending bloody Tatbir Ashura about tatbir,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSSRAmPH95o (Accessed 17 December 2014).
A person who “properly” understands Ashura as a call to action exists in a dignity/humiliation binary where the threat comes from outside himself; one who misinterprets it as an occasion for dissolving in grief embodies the internal threat of abjection that those with the “authentic” understanding seek to stamp out.

**Efficacy / Indulgence / Childishness.**

As the preservation of the nation’s (or sect’s) dignity is a paramount value in Resistance, efficacy in the efforts to do so becomes an essential operational concern. Military operations cannot be carried out willy-nilly. Not only would such carelessness be counterproductive, it would be *haram*, since killing of any kind—of others or of the self through martyrdom—is only acceptable through *jihad* (struggle to defend the faith), and operations that do not advance the cause cannot be justified in this way. Nasrallah articulated the value of efficacy in a 1996 interview (bolding added for emphasis):

> I come under pressure, every day, from young men eager to go out on martyrdom operations. I could easily tell any of them [simply to take explosives to the occupied zone and detonate when an opportunity arises]. We do not execute operations of this kind; if the operation is not **productive** and **effective**...we cannot legally, religiously, morally or humanely justify giving explosive devices to our brothers and telling them, “Go and become a martyr, no matter how!”

Here, efficacy is accomplished through the value of restraint. Though the desire to bleed (productively) for Husayn is strong among the mobilized, pious subjects, Hizballah’s leadership must exercise restraint to ensure that it is expressed effectively, for only then does it become virtuous. (It is also by this logic that working in support capacities for the Resistance, or donating blood, becomes a politically and religiously valid form of expressing piety in the model of Husayn.) Underlying this valuation of

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64 El-Husseini, “Resistance, Jihad and Martyrdom.”
restraint is the exercise of rationalism or objectivity in order to evaluate what operations will be effective and thus desirable. The opposite of restraint in this view is *indulgence*, in this case the indulgence of desire (both from the rank and file and from the leadership themselves): to allow would-be martyrs to express these desires however they see fit would be both an offense before God and an irrational, inhumane waste of resources and human life. Secondary to this fundamental transgression is, again, anxiety about outsiders’ perceptions. Nasrallah’s comment regarding effective martyrdom operations was in the context of a larger statement on the legitimacy of continuing the Resistance outside state authority—he was making a claim about the validity of Hizballah’s paradigm. That he felt the need to insist that the Resistance needs no outside restrictions because it places them on itself in order to avoid “our sons [dying] in vain” suggests anxiety that its operations were perceived as indiscriminate, the acts of senseless fanatics.

Indulgence brings us back to Fadlallah, who warns that “indulging in tragedy” blinds worshipers to the real meaning of Ashura. For him, to indulge in tragedy means to allow oneself to be overtaken by emotion (as occurs in *haidar*). He insists that correct understanding of the Message can only be achieved through “scientific and objective” evaluation of history, free from dramatic mythologizing (very much echoing al-Amin), and that “We have to rationalize our emotions…and not allow [them] to run out of control or to become childish in nature and deed.”

Again, the interiority of the believer is central, because it is through this conscious and conscientious understanding of the Message that the individual is able to achieve agency:

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66 Ibid., 173.
67 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 57-58.
70 Ibid., 35.
This will make Ashoora an act of awareness, not an act performed through fervor, because that is when a person understands where he stands and how the atmosphere around him and the political situations that are active and effective [sic]. [...] Fervour...makes you enthuse without control of your position, will or stance.\textsuperscript{71}

Without this awareness, under the influence of uncontrolled and irrational fervor, the believer becomes an uncomprehending child. Here, abjection takes the form of the loss of agency and reason as the self thoughtlessly acts out its desires. This is distinct from indulgence, in that Nasrallah’s formulation of it implies at least the correct understanding of what Ashura means, the possession of agency through the desire to act against injustice as Husayn did—merely agency misapplied. Again hinging on the modern individual—here with the rational capacity and social responsibility to exercise restraint—the rejected opposite of rational restraint is indulgence (shadowed by the threat of outsiders’ perceptions); the feared alternative appears as the loss of agency through uncontrolled fervor or emotion, embodied by haidar.

**Martyr / Victim / Flagellant (Life / Death / Inhumanity).**

Finally, we turn to the complex opposition that perhaps best encompasses all of the values present in the discursive “arms”: that of the martyr, the victim, and the flagellant, or the immortal, the undead, and the monster. Laleh Khalili’s examination of commemoration among Palestinians detailed a transnational ethos of heroic martyrdom, wherein the martyr is not understood as tragic but rather as life-affirming: “Rebirth, renewal, and ultimate victory are seen as immanent to self-sacrifice. Often martyrdom is deemed the only route to a meaningful life.”\textsuperscript{72} As El-Husseini has detailed, the martyr’s death is accession to immortality; his blood renews the nation

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{72} Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, 19.
and the cause, and his death is not a suicide but an apotheosis. Martyrs’ names and faces are immortalized in print, broadcast media, songs, and the commemorative use of space through posters, graves, built memorials, etc. These phenomena correspond closely with Lebanese practices, as many of them developed in the Palestinian camps in Lebanon, sometimes in tandem with Lebanese actors including Hizballah.

Consequently, many of the same forms of commemoration can be found in Hizballah’s media works and in the public space of al-dahiyya. Images of martyrs abound, drawing on the inevitable personal connections of a dense, small (spatially and numerically), and tight-knit community while also rendering these individuals metonyms for the movement and the community as a whole. Their names are read out on the radio on the anniversaries of their deaths, their families interviewed, and their farewell videos broadcast on television. Their possessions are kept and treasured as relics for exhibition. They become immortal, the renewers and embodiment of Resistance. Nasrallah echoed this discourse when his son was killed: “Let me go back to the martyrs of September 13, and say that our pride today comes as a result of this spilled blood, and that our path will continue because of it.”

For Nasrallah, the opposite of martyrdom is simply its absence, analogous to the passive failure to act when confronted with the Message: he spoke eloquently about the shame he used to feel when confronted with martyrs’ families in not sharing their experience. However, in Khalili’s formulation, the martyr’s opposite is the worthy victim—that is, the person who suffers well enough to be worthy of international aid. This is a pathetic icon not unlike our first abjection of the flagellant,

El-Husseini, “Resistance, Jihad and Martyrdom.”
Khalili, Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine, chapters 4 and 5.
Ibid., 31-33.
Deeb, An Enchanted Modern, 56-57.
Ibid., 173-174.
in that its figure wallows in suffering and does not act. However, the worthy victim is not analogous to the flagellant; there is, in fact, no such icon in the Resistance’s lexicon, because such appeal for international handouts would be inviting interference and thus the humiliation of another kind of occupation. (Additionally, the absence of the victim as a direct opposite to the martyr in Nasrallah’s statements may reflect the fact that martyrs are coded male and the worthy victim is coded female, despite exceptions to both rules in reality.) This icon is thus firmly rejected; even the images of orphans that also abound in al-dahiyya are connected to martyrdom. These images are read as the children of martyrs and thus serve as a local appeal to support the resistance. The worthy victim in Khalili’s work is all but dead. Rather than revitalizing life through death as martyrs do, the victim subsists in life by means of a kind of spiritual death, objectified silence and passivity in exchange for assistance.

Where, then, does the flagellant enter the picture? Tellingly, it is through the axis of humanity. To be slightly whimsical (and Eurocentric) for a moment: since abjection is the discourse of monstrosity (and therefore the supernatural), we can map the martyr onto the saint or demigod—a person who, through their heroism, lives forever—and the worthy victim onto the vampire, someone who used to be human and now survives, undead (in existence but without vitality) and entirely off of others’ life force. Both supernatural figures have relationships to the normal human being: they were human once, flesh and blood, warm and living. The truest monster is that which has no humanity, and indeed Nasrallah insists that haidar is an inhuman manner of expressing grief:

These practices are backward habits in the expression of sadness, for

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82 The appropriation of saints from Catholicism as a way to talk about Shi‘ism, at least, has been used before. See Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, and Nakash, “The Rituals of Muharram.”
sadness has other civilized, human ways of expression. Sadness is not an act of self torture [sic], but rather an act that expresses the humanity of the self.83

This is, perhaps, the most disgusted Fadlallah appears at any point while discussing haidar. There are moments when he uses technically stronger language, as when he declares self-harm “absolutely forbidden,”84 but this is the moment in which his carefully reasoned arguments against haidar from logical, religious, scientific, and image-conscious standpoints crack open slightly and reveal a more visceral sense of rejection: flagellation is not only misguided and distasteful but inhuman. That which is inhuman cannot be explained or empathetically entered into, and yet here it is, despite his prohibitions and those of many other authorities as great or greater than he.

In this final “cluster,” the value to be upheld is martyrdom in all its vitality. Its rejected opposite is victimhood, particularly victimhood as performed for outside intervention; indeed, it is not hard to imagine that this rejection of victimhood is one reason that even civilians killed through no action of their own at all are termed “martyrs” rather than “victims” of enemy aggression.85 The feared alternative to martyrdom, meanwhile, its abject, is the flagellant: someone who neither lives through death nor dies to live, but spends his blood uselessly, mindlessly, in the street on Ashura.

Conclusions.

Another of Kristeva’s descriptions of the abject is “A weight of meaningfulness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me.”86

This is precisely the basis of contemporary Lebanese rejection of haidar: as I have

83 Fadlallah, Ashoora, 41.
84 Ibid., 39.
85 Alagha, Hizbullah’s Identity Construction, 97-98.
86 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 2.
shown through our three clusters of oppositions, it is the embodiment of the absence of meaning. The Message fails to arrive due to excessive emotion, or it is rendered useless by lack of consciousness, or it simply runs aground on the abrupt fact of inhumanity. As I noted very early in this paper, the entire question at hand is that of identity, of how to be a person; for the pious Shi‘i modern, this issue has very specific meaning in terms of consciousness, self-improvement, intellectual and political agency, the image of the sect, and, of course, resistance. As every superego has its abject, so this intensely intellectual development takes not the opposite of thought (constructed as emotion) as its “jettisoned” quality; emotion, in binary with thought, has a necessary place. Rather it is the radical unmooring of the careful structures of meaning that the revolutionized Karbala paradigm and the Islamic Resistance have built since the mid-1970s that so shakes the pious modern. The flagellant is incomprehensible because he is completely outside the language of the Message, which is to get up, turn outward, act, and fight. As such, he represents ultimate disgust and anxiety in terms of the ideational structures that informed the Islamic Resistance as it had developed by the 2000s. Deeb asks about her interlocutors’ discussions of progress, “Better than what? Progress from what?”87 This inner anxiety, this monstrous, undignified, irrational, aimless self, embodies that which must be left behind: a person without the Message is a life without meaning, progress, or reason, and that cannot be borne.

87 Deeb, An Enchanted Modern, 19.
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Cairo: Banning Reality and Publishing Fantasy

Noran R. Amin
M.A. Student
Department of English
University of Wyoming

Abstract

This paper compares two graphic novels written about Cairo, namely Cairo: A Graphic Novel by the American novelist G. Willow Wilson (art by M.K. Perker), and Metro: A Story of Cairo by the Egyptian novelist Magdy El Shafee (art by Magdy El Shafee). The way each of the authors and illustrators portray Cairo is discussed as well as the readership of the two narratives and the reactions they invoked in different readers. From my own point of view as a Cairene, neither the story nor the illustration in Wilson’s novel present a true image of Cairo that Cairenes can relate to; it shows Cairene readers a distorted image of the city that has nothing to do with their collective memory. Additionally, it gives non-Cairene readers a false, exotic, imaginary, and Orientalist image of the place that reinforces untrue, constructed stereotypes. El Shafee’s novel, on the other hand, delineates Cairo very accurately and realistically through the narrative and the art. He creates an image that Cairenes can identify with, and that breaks the long-held notions and stereotypes non-Cairene readers have always been exposed to in Orientalist narratives. I argue in this paper that by presenting a more realistic image of the city, writers do justice to their unknowing audience: those who have never visited the place or who have a generalized knowledge about it. A non-realistic image does not only delude readers, it also harms the actuality of the place that is presented, and it repels the knowing audience as it misrepresents their identity. I also argue that because graphic novels, as a genre, have a long history of not being taken seriously, writers and illustrators need to be honest with their readers to a certain extent, so that they may valorize and further appreciate this type of narrative.

Key Words: Graphic Novels, Cairo, Metro, El Shafee, Wilson, Perker, McCloud, Orientalism, Magical Realism, Fantasy, Reality, Banning, Illustration.
Introduction.

It is hard to describe today’s Cairo. Although I was born and lived my entire life there, whenever I am asked to describe it, I compare it to the most universally known cities that resemble it. Cairo is a city that never sleeps, like New York; it is as busy and fast-paced, and even more crowded. Those who have visited Paris or London will see similarities between the architecture there and the buildings in downtown Cairo. Cairo’s clamor can be compared to that of Istanbul. The behavior of its people is as unregimented as that of many in New Delhi. Thus, Cairo is indeed similar, in various ways, to the biggest cities of the East and the West.

However, its local cultural features can hardly be compared to those of any other city. It is even different from other cities and governorates within Egypt itself. The Egyptian Nobel Prize-winning writer Naguib Mahfouz is one of the few writers who have been able to attend to the minute details of Cairene streets; he delineates them in a clear and accurate manner in his Cairo Trilogy (1957). Nevertheless, the Cairo he describes in his trilogy and the Cairo of his day are very different from today’s Cairo.

Graphic novels perhaps most accurately depict the topsy-turvy, modern day Cairo. Uniquely, they can capture panoramic and multiple views. The tools available to comic artists make the portrayal of a city’s constant and rapid movements and simultaneous incidents easier than it would be for filmmakers or writers of other genres. According to Scott McCloud in “Chapter Four: Time Frames” of Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art,
THE PAGE IN WAYS NOT ALWAYS CONDUCIVE TO TRADITIONAL PICTURE-MAKING.¹

This statement explains how comic artists have the ability to compile an unlimited number of actions and events on the same page. In movies, on the other hand, if one scene shows several actions, the audience inevitably focuses on one specific movement at a time as the eye cannot capture every single action taking place; unless the picture is paused, it is difficult to grasp every detail. However, in graphic novels, one panel can contain numerous movements and activities, and readers can spend as much time as they desire with the panel to attend to all the actions portrayed. Additionally, the use of word balloons and sound effects in comics helps authors present actions and reactions on the same page. For these reasons, comic artists are able to present the instantaneous flux of movement of Cairene streets. However, reality is relative, and Cairo reveals itself in different manners to different comic authors and artists. Writers and artists usually bring their own unique perspectives of reality to their art.

In this paper I will examine two different graphic novels written about Cairo: *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* (2007) by G. Willow Wilson (art by M.K. Perker), and *Metro: A Story of Cairo* (2008) by Magdy El Shafee (art by Magdy El Shafee).² The aim of this paper is two-fold; first, I will compare the ways in which the authors and the artists of these graphic novels, who come from completely different backgrounds, depict Cairo.³ The purpose of this comparison is to determine which of the two

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³ Wilson is American, Perker is Turkish, and El Shafee, author and illustrator, is Egyptian/Cairene.
narratives presents an image closest to the real Cairo, and how much of the authors’/illustrators’ portrayal is authentic versus how much is fantasized. Second, I will discuss the readership of the two narratives, and the types of reactions these two novels invoke in different audiences. I argue that by giving a more realistic image of the city, writers do justice to their unknowing audience: readers who have never visited the place or who have only a generalized knowledge about it. A non-realistic image deludes readers. I also argue that because graphic novels, as a genre, have a long history of not being taken seriously, writers and illustrators need to be honest with their readers so that they will further appreciate this type of narrative.

The Portrayal of Cairo in G. Willow Wilson’s *Cairo: A Graphic Novel.*

*Cairo: A Graphic Novel* is the first graphic novel by the American comics writer G. Willow Wilson. The first page of the novel has six panels that contain images of the following: a desert, desert plants, a hookah, and a camel. The first reaction I had while looking at these images without even reading the content of the panels was “This is not Cairo! This has nothing to do with modern Cairo!” I thought my impression would change as I read further in the narrative, but it remained with me until the very last page. Wilson does not tell readers at any point in the narrative whether the story takes place in ancient or modern Cairo. However, the novel was published in 2007, and Wilson lived in Egypt during the reign of Hosni Mubarak, which started in 1980 and ended in 2011. Her antique depiction of the city raises many questions. The illustrations do not help elucidate which Cairo this narrative is about; most of the places illustrated are either in Old Cairo (as they appear to me as a Cairene), or are fantastical places derived from the imagination of the author or the
illustrator. The way Wilson and Perker depict Cairo makes the narrative susceptible to postcolonial critique.

The image of Cairo in Wilson’s narrative is an Orientalist image, a stereotypical image that can be found in the writings and paintings of Orientalist artists from the West who found the exoticism of the East appealing. It is reminiscent of the image of the East in the stories of *The Book of One Thousand and One Nights*, or *Arabian Nights*. For instance, almost every page of the first fifteen pages of the narrative, which are supposed to introduce readers to the setting, time, and characters, has a picture of a mosque with huge domes and minarets. The streets of Cairo look vast, wide, and, in a way, untrodden; very few people are shown walking on its streets. The architecture, as shown through the illustration, gives the impression that Cairo has never been modernized. The people drawn on these pages are either wearing jilbabs, emmas, taqiyas, abayas, hijabs, or burkas. Some other people are drawn wearing tarboushes or fezzes.

As for the mosques with domes and minarets, it is undeniable that Cairo is full of them. It has even been named across the ages “The City of the One Thousand Minarets.” However, the illustration in Wilson’s narrative suggests that one finds minarets every few steps one walks, which is not true and misleading. Furthermore, Cairo has always been a home or a hub for different religions. On the streets of modern Cairo next to almost every masjid (mosque) there is a church. In downtown, or central, Cairo, there are Jewish synagogues as well. The narrative does not portray

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4 The term ‘Orientalist’ derives from the idea of the ‘Orient’ that was conceptualized by the iconic postcolonial literary theorist Edward Said in his internationally acclaimed book *Orientalism*, in which he criticizes images that reinforce constructed or preconceived notions reflecting a very limited understanding of the East.

5 These are works of medieval Arabic literature with unknown origins.

6 These are traditional costumes of men in Egypt.

7 These are costumes of females in Islamic countries.

8 Traditional red felt hats with a tassel attached to the top.

9 *Masjid* is the Arabic word for mosque.
Cairo’s diversity in terms of religious institutes and buildings. The streets of modern Cairo do vary in width, but they are never empty. The illustrations do not capture the crowds and commotion that are in Cairene streets almost all day long.

Perker also does not present the diversity of Cairo’s architecture. He does not show, for instance, the villas in Maadi and Garden City. He ignores the buildings in downtown Cairo built by French, Italian, and British architectural engineers during and prior to the British occupation of Egypt\textsuperscript{10} that are similar to those in Piccadilly Square in London or on the Champs-Elysees in Paris. The narrative only depicts what looks like Fatimid Cairo (established in 969 CE by the Fatimid Caliphate). Today in Cairo, there are only some remnants of the Fatimid period and they are considered tourist attractions rather than places frequented by Egyptians. People who live there are either owners of tourism businesses or guards in the mosques. Egyptians and tourists go to these places to learn about history and see Fatimid monuments.

People in modern Cairo do not wear the clothing illustrated by Perker in the narrative; they wear modern attire like people everywhere around the world. There never was a particular type of genuinely Egyptian costume. Even ‘traditional’ garb was imported to Egypt from outside due to its interaction with different cultures. If an American and an Egyptian are walking on the same street, the only apparent differences between them might be skin color, eyes, or hair, but not dress. Clothing in Egypt can be a marker of social class, with the upper class dressing more extravagantly than the poorer class. But in the narrative, readers do not see this variety as most of the characters depicted dress the same way except for the main characters and the foreigners (non-Egyptians).

\textsuperscript{10} The British occupation of Egypt is sometimes referred to as the British Protectorate. It lasted from 1882 until 1956.
It appears to me as a reader, knowing that Perker is Turkish, that he has allowed himself to be influenced by his background in that he delineates Cairo in a way that looks similar to major cities in Turkey. The image of Cairo on page 6 in the novel could pass as a picture of Istanbul. This image of a large dome with a minaret in the background is often seen on postcards sold in Turkish bazaars. Next to the main character in the foreground of the picture on page 6 are a lady and a young girl walking on the street wearing hijab in the same manner worn by women and children in Turkey, which is not the way Muslim Egyptian women wear it nowadays. The fezzes or tarboushes that many of the men in the narrative are wearing are Turkish imports that were worn by Egyptian men during and shortly after Ottoman rule, but they are no longer worn today. Most of the buildings depicted in the narrative resemble buildings I have seen in Istanbul and Antalya that are remnants of the Ottoman Empire. While some Cairo buildings date back to the Ottoman era, they do not represent Cairo’s architectural diversity and should not stand alone in a novel entitled Cairo.

Unless the novelist is him or herself an artist, a graphic novel is a joint project between an author and an illustrator. Although Wilson lived in Cairo for a long time,\(^\text{11}\) for some reason she chose to have Perker illustrate Cairo in a way that diminishes its unique cultural features and makes it a replica of Istanbul or other well-known Turkish cities. The only pages in the narrative that show a real Egypt are those illustrating pharaonic temples and the last pages of the narrative showing the Egyptian Museum. This, however, is still a stereotypical image of Egypt. While the Egyptian Museum contains many pharaonic monuments, most of the ancient Egyptian temples

\(^{11}\) This is according to the article “An American in Cairo,” Daily News Egypt, Daily News Egypt, 28 Aug. 2009, Web, 29 Nov. 2014.
and monuments are in Luxor and Aswan, not in Cairo. Even the pyramids that appear right before the end of the narrative are in Giza, not Cairo. It is unclear whether these fabricated images of Cairo are the product of Wilson’s imagination as the author, or Perker’s vision as an illustrator.

Wilson does not seem to care about providing her readers with a true representation of Cairo. It appears that she used the place, Cairo, in this narrative as a catalyst to promote themes of coexistence, sacrifice, love, defiance, and tolerance towards different religions. These themes are integrated into the fabric of the story. R. E. Michael writes in his article “Cairo Presents Lush Fantasy and Stark Realism” that by “[f]using realistic concerns into a work of fantasy, Wilson creates a scenario where her protagonists must overcome their cultural differences to succeed and survive.” This was most likely Wilson’s main goal in writing the graphic novel. Thus, her depictions of the place and the characters were not meant to be realistic. The only elements that can be considered real or of real significance in this narrative are the social, political, and religious themes she aims to present. If a reader wants to explore the character traits of Cairenes, he or she cannot rely on this narrative because even the protagonists are products of fantasy. It is a story that presents a world of genies, demons, flying carpets, and magic; a battle between good and evil that emphasizes the goodness of Muslims and Islam. However, even in attempting to show readers the true face of Islam, or to rectify the image of Islam that is promoted through other types of media, Wilson links Islam with fantasy, superstition, and magic. While her depiction, in a way, negates the concept of Islam as a violent religion, she still does

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not provide her readers with a real\textsuperscript{13} image. In an interview for \textit{Daily News Egypt}, Wilson stated:

I wrote "Cairo" while reading heavy doses of Edward Said, which is probably obvious. Right now 'the Middle East' and 'the Muslim world' are terms that belong more to people who study them than they do to the people who live there. That's pretty disturbing, I hope it will change as Middle Easterners and Muslims produce and export more of their own media.\textsuperscript{14}

What is disturbing about this quote is that if she really wanted to reverse the image of the Middle East and Islam or Muslims, she should have presented a realistic image. She later said in the interview that she did not think it was wrong to want to escape from real facts sometimes and “imagine another reality.” The problem with this is that she does exactly what Edward Said criticizes in \textit{Orientalism}. She exports to Western countries an imaginative picture of a place that has always been stigmatized with long-held false notions that are rarely contradicted. She presents a distorted image.

When asked in the same interview about the first comic strips she read that introduced her to the world of graphic novels, she mentioned \textit{X-Men} and other comic books about superheroes, stories with happy endings in which evil is defeated by the good hero. She also stated, when asked how she viewed Cairo, “This city is just a perfect setting for an adventure story.” It appears that her upbringing as an American reader exposed to adventure stories of superheroes affected her writing. It is the reason why her depiction of Cairo and the characters is so far from reality. She gives her readers an Americanized version of Cairo and Cairenes blended with images of Eastern exoticism. \textit{Daily News Egypt} stated that, “a thorough examination of Wilson’s non-fiction writings reveals a deep understanding of the Egyptian culture that

\textsuperscript{13} Italics used for emphasis.

\textsuperscript{14} “An American in Cairo.”
transcends the stereotyped khawaga/outsider outlook.”15 In Cairo: A Graphic Novel, however, the only point of view readers are exposed to is this exact “stereotyped khawaga/outsider outlook” that Wilson has supposedly transcended.

Wilson’s graphic novel ends on a happy-ever-after note. Because she divides her main characters into archetypes who are either utterly good or utterly bad, with no grey areas, she allows her good characters to win a battle with evil to tell her readers that being good makes one victorious. One of her good protagonists, accompanied throughout the narrative by a good jinn (genie) who teaches him the mighty powers of the Koran, uses a magical sword to kill the bad guy to rid the world of his destructive and vicious maneuvers. Once the bad guy is killed, two other main characters, an Egyptian young man and an Israeli woman, come together as lovers in a final scene in which they kiss in the middle of a Cairene street (which never happens in conservative Cairo) and decide to live together despite their religious differences and the conflicts that exist between their countries. This ending, of course, is the epitome of coexistence and virtuosity that Wilson tries to advocate for throughout the narrative. However, it is didactic and clichéd. It adds to the narrative’s pretentiousness and makes it more of an entertaining fairy tale that can be read to children as a bedtime story rather than a realistic graphic novel.

I do not claim that graphic novels must necessarily be realistic, but if neither the story and its end, nor the illustrations, provide adult readers with a reliable image of a place and its people, the genre will continue to exclusively be deemed the realm of fantasy and imagination. Additionally, the fact that the narrative ends with a zoom-in on two lovers kissing makes it more like a typical Hollywood movie with a happy ending. The end also resembles the happy ending in the film version of The Thief of

15 “An American in Cairo.”
Baghdad\textsuperscript{16} from \textit{The Book of One Thousand and One Nights}. It reiterates stereotypical images that a non-Cairene reader, especially a reader outside the academic sphere, can easily trust. Thus, as a Cairene, I find that this fictitious ending not only Americanizes the cultural traits of Cairo and Cairenes, but also reestablishes a romanticized and exotic image of the Orient. It is an example of neo-Orientalism in the 2000s.

\textbf{The Portrayal of Cairo in Magdy El Shafee’s Metro: A Story of Cairo.}

Magdy El Shafee’s novel \textit{Metro: A Story of Cairo} is his first and only published graphic novel. The central site of the narrative’s action is the Cairo Metro Station, or the subway system of Cairo.\textsuperscript{17} The subway of Cairo is in the center of the city. It runs through most of the streets and districts. It has been a witness to every single incident that has taken place in Cairo since the day of its opening in 1987, and played a crucial role in the Egyptian Revolution on the 25\textsuperscript{th} of January 2011. Cairenes regularly escape the city’s unruly traffic by riding the metro. Because of the relevance of the Metro Station to all Cairenes, even those who do not commute on it, El Shafee’s choice to make it the central location in the narrative is well-thought-out.

In the prelims of El Shafee’s graphic novel, there is a picture of the metro sign, which is familiar to all Cairenes. Those who ride the metro, as well as those who do not, see it on most of Cairo’s streets. By using this sign, El Shafee creates an “ICON,” which is, according to McCloud in \textit{Understanding Comics}, “ANY IMAGE USED TO PRESENT A PERSON, PLACE, THING, OR IDEA.”\textsuperscript{18} This icon represents Cairo as

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{The Thief of Baghdad} (1940) is a British movie based on a story of \textit{The Book of One Thousand and One Nights}.

\textsuperscript{17} I intentionally did not add an /s/ to the word station because as a Cairene, I am accustomed to speaking of all metro stations as one big station due to their connection to each other, and because this is the way we speak of them in Arabic.

\textsuperscript{18} McCloud, 27. Caps in original.
a modern metropolis, as well as a symbol that is part of Cairenes' collective identity and memory.

El Shafee also accurately depicts the architecture of modern Cairo. The first page of the narrative presents the diversity of Cairo’s buildings. In the foreground is a tall building that is typical of those on the streets of modern Cairo. Behind it is a shorter building that appears to date back to the time Egypt was under British rule. In the background is a tiny minaret of a Cairene masjid. As a Cairene, I can relate to this image of a Cairo street today.

In other panels, El Shafee zooms in on various details of Cairo’s diverse architecture. Throughout the narrative, he depicts places familiar to every Cairene. For example, on page 28, he draws a bird’s eye view of the famous and iconic statue of Ibrahim Pasha on his horse pointing downwards with his finger. This statue is located in the heart of downtown Cairo in the vibrant and lively El Ataba Square. Educated Cairenes understand the significance of this statue and consider it a symbol of Egypt’s modern history. Even Cairenes who do not know the history of Ibrahim Pasha can relate to this statue as “the statue with the finger.” Just by looking at these images, before even attending to the text, readers know they can take the narrative seriously. El Shafee has provided his readers with a representation of Cairo that opposes stereotypes, validates the city’s modernity, and creates a historical archive for both Cairene and non-Cairene readers. In this way, he ensures that his art contributes to the creation of collective memory and history.

19 Ibrahim Pasha (1789-1848) was the son of Mohammed Ali Pasha who ruled Egypt when it was part of the Ottoman Empire. He succeeded his father in ruling Egypt, and was known as the Wali or the Khedive of Egypt and Sudan.
20 The statue divides European Cairo from Islamic Cairo. Ibrahim Pasha’s horse faces the European (or the modern) district near the Nile River, and the statue’s back faces the maze of markets in Islamic Old Cairo. It symbolizes Ibrahim Pasha’s movement towards his target, which was modernity and the modernization (or the Europeanization) of Cairo.
In many of the panels in the narrative, El Shafee uses Arabic words, most of which are names of metro stations. The majority of the stations in Cairo’s subway system are named after either iconic Egyptian figures or Egyptian presidents. The station name “Sayeda Zainab,” for example, is familiar to Cairene Muslims as it is the name of an Islamic saint they cherish. The station name “Mar Girgis” attracts the attention of Cairene Christians as the name of a Coptic saint as well as the name of a district known for many old churches. The names of presidents, like Mohammed Naguib, Gamal Abd El Nasser, Anwar El Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak, are significant to every Cairene because of the role of each of these presidents in the establishment of postcolonial Cairo. By showing these names in the form of words written on banners in metro stations or on the metro map, El Shafee presents them as icons that encode layers of historical accounts and threads of events prominent in the memories of most Cairenes. For non-Cairene readers, the use and presentation of these words might not be familiar, but they suggest the diversity of Cairo and the greatness of its history. By using this tool, El Shafee makes his narrative credible.

A recurrent image in El Shafee’s graphic novel is the metro map showing the connections between the different areas, districts, suburbs, and streets of Cairo. They depict the vastness and enormity of Cairo. El Shafee’s maps cleverly show readers that Cairo’s vastness cannot be contained within the borders of a graphic novel. It extends beyond the limits of the narrative. This allows readers to exercise the mental mechanism of what McCloud in *Understanding Comics* terms “CLOSURE,” which refers to observing the parts but perceiving the whole. Readers follow the protagonist’s path and see specific parts of Cairo that El Shafee chooses to depict, like Maadi and Sayeda Zainab. Because other districts of Cairo were not drawn, the metro

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21 McCloud, 63. Caps in original.
maps help to mentally add the missing pieces of the puzzle to create a larger picture of Cairo. This allows non-Cairene readers to get a feel for Cairo’s size, since the images they are usually exposed to mainly focus on its iconic areas and do not do justice to the city as a whole.

In his illustrations, El Shafee uses several tools to symbolize the liveliness and crowdedness of Cairene streets and metro stations. Each panel is packed with several people doing different activities at the same time. On several pages, readers do not see clear cuts between panels, which symbolizes the chaotic nature of the city. Through his use of auditory symbols, readers can sense the noise level of Cairene streets. He uses car honks and words like “SCREECH” and “VROOOOOM” to depict reckless driving. His use of musical symbols and song lyrics indicate Cairenes’ infatuation with cell phone ring tones. These are a mix of old and new songs that different generations of Cairenes can relate to.

The places visited by the protagonist include both posh and poor areas, reflecting the reality of the divisions between Cairene social classes. In his delineation of Maadi, a Cairo neighborhood mostly inhabited by the upper class, readers see trees, neat streets, and elegantly dressed pedestrians. They also see supermarkets, such as Alfa Market, that are known to be frequented only by the wealthy. When the protagonist goes to downtown Cairo, however, readers see the banks, insurance companies, and metro stations where most middle class Cairenes spend their days. To complete the picture, El Shafee gives an example of the poorest of Cairo’s districts by illustrating Sayeda Zainab. Here readers see pedestrians dressed in rags, street markets selling low-priced fruit and vegetables, and run-down buildings. Also seen are the fortune tellers who dwell near the shrine of Sayeda Zainab, alluding to superstitious Cairenes who believe in magic. El Shafee compiles all of these images in
one graphic novel to give his readers a sense of the jumbled local features of modern Cairo.

The types of clothing Cairenes are shown wearing realistically depict the way modern day Egyptians dress. Some women are shown wearing hijab, which is a sign of their religious affiliation. Others are drawn without a headscarf, signifying that they are either Christian Egyptians, modern or liberal Muslims who choose not to wear hijab, or women who simply refuse to dress in a way that labels them. As for the men, different generations of Cairene men are illustrated in age-appropriate attire. Elderly men wear suits and youths wear T-shirts and jeans. If anyone walks on any Cairene street today, he or she will see men dressed in the exact manner El Shafee depicts. El Shafee also uses clothing to indicate social classes. Most of the poor characters in the narrative (from Cairene ghettos) are drawn wearing ragged jilbabs, emmas (white sheets of cloth they wrap around their heads in a circular fashion), or taqiyas (hats). Rich people, on the other hand, are drawn wearing chic tuxedos and neckties, stylish shiny shoes, and nothing on their heads. El Shafee manages to bring these different people together in the same panels to illustrate Cairo’s diversity.

The plot of the narrative works hand in hand with the illustrations to give a realistic view of modern day Cairo. It is an adventure carried out by an Egyptian young man, but it is not the type of adventure found in comics such as The Adventures of Tintin or The Adventures of Asterix. It is a realistic modern day adventure of a young Egyptian attempting to fight and defy corruption, poverty, chaos, and the feeling of being entrapped and imprisoned in one’s own city or country. The creation of this piece of art shows El Shafee’s craftsmanship as he cleverly delves into real problems suffered by Egyptian youths. The protagonist in El Shafee’s narrative speaks of Cairo as a cage. He uses recurring words that show how much he feels
confined and jailed in Cairo because of the corruption and unfairness of its people and rulers. He keeps repeating the following phrase: “WE’RE ALL IN A CAGE. THE WAY OUT IS WIDE OPEN, BUT WE’RE STUCK INSIDE BECAUSE NO ONE EVER TRIES WALKING OUT OF IT.”22 This recurrent analogy between Cairo and a prison is closely associated with the recurrent appearance of metro maps and stations in the narrative. Lines drawn on metro maps show passengers their targeted destinations. None of the passengers can make the metro change direction. Like its passengers, the metro moves like a snake through the mazes drawn on the maps and cannot change its route by breaking through and moving beyond the walls of the stations.

This metaphor shows readers the connection between the entrapment of the freely moving Cairenes within the boundaries of the streets of Cairo and the limitation of the rapidly moving metro that takes the same predetermined path within the boundaries and borders of the stations. This image demonstrates the reality of modern day Cairenes; they are driven, but unaware of how to break the limiting corrupt rules of the city and create new options. On page 4, El Shafee shows the metro map and sign in the same panel where the protagonist compares the city to a cage. This technique not only condenses Cairenes’ feelings of frustration and entrapment in a visual image, but also challenges them to think outside the box and find new routes or life paths.

El Shafee ends his narrative with a symbolic scene of great significance to every Cairene who rejected Hosni Mubarak’s 30-year rule of Egypt. The setting is inside Hosni Mubarak’s metro station that is packed with people getting on and off the train, going up and down escalators and stairs, and heading in and out of the

22 El Shafee, 4. Caps in original.
station, along with trains arriving and departing. On the final page of the narrative are three horizontal panels. The first panel shows an exit sign in the background with an arrow pointing towards the gate of the station. In the foreground, the protagonist is shown facing his lover and saying, “LET’S GET OUT OF THIS TUNNEL.” The second panel shows the two lovers holding hands, still facing each other in the foreground, and a banner with the name of Hosni Mubarak in the background. The third panel shows the two lovers standing in the same spot in the foreground, but the banner with Mubarak’s name is hidden from the reader’s view by passengers standing in front of it.

The symbolism of this ending represents Cairenes’ painful reality. Prior to the Egyptian Revolution of the 25th of January 2011, the majority of Cairenes desired to force Mubarak and his corrupt regime out of power. They felt trapped and could not think of ways to escape oppression and nepotism. They demanded an end to poverty and cried for freedom and social justice. The protagonist’s words, the exit sign, and the screening of Mubarak’s name by the crowds in these final panels urge Cairenes toward their freedom. Reading this novel after the revolution that overthrew Mubarak, I realized that this graphic novel not only presents a reality I witnessed and experienced as a Cairene, it also aimed to prompt young Egyptians to make a move and foreshadowed the end of Mubarak’s dictatorship.

Readership and Reception of *Cairo: A Graphic Novel* and *Metro: A Story of Cairo*.

Wilson’s graphic novel was published by DC Vertigo and found its way to American bookstores in 2007. It was listed as a top graphic novel for teens by both the American Library Association and the *School Library Journal*. However, when it was exported to Egypt after its publication, according to *Daily News Egypt*, readers
“didn’t buy it […] because the blend between myth and reality didn’t sit well with them.” Egyptians most likely reacted this way because they could not find any implementable ideas or connections in the novel related to their present lives. Wilson stated in her interview with Daily News Egypt that, “I stayed away from politics. It's daily life that interests me most: the intersection of society, religion and individual personalities.” However, even in her depiction of these non-political matters, she does not meet the average Cairene’s expectations. Wilson’s novel likely had a wide readership in the West, especially in the U.S., because it resembles mainstream American comics, like Superman or Captain America. In addition, because Western readers might not have seen the real Cairo, it would be easy to buy into what is presented in Wilson’s narrative and take it as factual.

Cairo: A Graphic Novel is available in Egypt at Diwan Bookstores, American University of Cairo (AUC) Bookstore, and Dar Al Shorouk Bookstores, according to Daily News Egypt. These are exclusive bookstores whose books are unaffordable for many Egyptians. Furthermore, because the novel has never been translated into Arabic, it is accessible only to academics or highly educated Egyptians who can read English. When asked in her interview with Daily News Egypt about why, in her opinion, the novel was not as widely available in Egypt as it should be, Wilson explained that it was “a distribution problem, an import-tax problem, a language problem, a price-point problem.” To date, these problems have not been fixed, and the novel still has little readership in Cairo.

El Shafee’s novel, on the other hand, was originally written in Arabic and published by the Egyptian publishing house Malamih. Shortly after its publication, the

23 “An American in Cairo.”
24 “An American in Cairo.”
25 “An American in Cairo.”
book was banned and El Shafee and his publisher were arrested by the Mubarak regime. According to *The National* newspaper in the article “Egyptian Graphic Novel Rekindles an Art Form,” it was “removed from shelves permanently by a court order. Both its writer and publisher were fined 5,000 Egyptian pounds.” Consequently, most Egyptians have never read the novel, and many do not even know it exists, except for some cartoonists and followers who knew El Shafee and his work. Vick Mickunas writes in the article “Journalism Tells the News via Comics” in *Dayton Daily News* that the Egyptian court “deemed the book ‘offensive to public morals.’” Maya Jaggi writes in *Newsweek International* that the court believed the book to be “disseminating ‘immoral and indecent’ materials.” Jaggi adds that “a scene of an unmarried couple having sex under a blanket may have furnished a pretext for the ban.” In response to the court’s verdict to ban the book, El Shafee raised an important question when interviewed by Jason Koutsoukis in the article “Graphic Novel Ban: A Question of Decency” for *Age* newspaper: “There is some limited content of a sexual nature in Metro, but would that really infringe the public's sense of public decency?”

Many other contemporary Egyptian novels include sex scenes. For example, Alaa Al Aswany’s *The Yacoubian Building* and *Chicago*, and Naguib Mahfouz’s *Cairo Trilogy* include scenes that can be considered obscene, yet they were never banned. Wilson’s narrative includes a kissing scene, and it is available in Egyptian bookstores. It is unlikely that the reason for the ban was profanity or indecency. It is

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more likely that El Shafee’s novel was banned for two political reasons. First, the novel realistically portrayed the dissatisfaction of modern Egyptians. Second, it was written in Arabic and could have reached a broad audience. Egyptian authorities possibly believed the novel threatened the country’s stability and might have incited a revolt among the people. When asked in her interview with Daily News Egypt about why she thought El Shafee’s novel was banned in Egypt, Wilson stated:

I think the reason is in the title: graphic. People always respond more strongly to pictures than they do to simple words. Plus -- and correct me if I’m wrong here -- I feel like most of the provocative fiction that has come out of Egypt in recent years has been pretty allegorical. Mubarak is rarely mentioned by name. With pictures, it's harder to disguise what you're talking about. So it makes the authorities nervous.30

What saved El Shafee’s novel from literary obscurity was the fact that it was translated into English by Chip Rosetti and republished in 2012 by Metropolitan Books. As a result, a realistic image of Cairo was exported to the West, where the readership of this narrative is expanding.

**Conclusion.**

Alas, it is the fantasized image of Cairo in Wilson’s narrative that has been soaring freely, as it has become internationally popular, even in Egypt, while El Shafee’s more realistic depiction has been held back and shackled. It is unfair that fantasy and magical realism get published and spread widely, while the depiction of real life gets banned and buried alive. Now that both narratives are available in English, readers can read both and decide for themselves which of the images is real and truthful, and which is fantasized and stereotypical. I am not against fantasizing reality, on the contrary, fantasy writing is great. However, while imagination should

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30 “An American in Cairo.”
play a part in the creation of fiction, there has to be a way for non-fantasy graphic novels to come to light and be read, as they document and archive crucial incidents in people’s lives. Although magical realism can be highly political sometimes, writers should be careful about the messages they communicate because they can, as in Wilson’s case, reinforce stereotypes rather than deconstruct them. Because graphic novels have recently proven to be a good medium for recording historical facts, authors and illustrators have a responsibility to wisely use the tools of this booming genre to truthfully present hidden, unknown, or distorted realities. This guarantees a promising future for the genre.
Works Cited:


We thank all contributors to this volume