

IN SEARCH OF SELF:  
A STUDY OF QUEER ARAB WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES POST-  
MIGRATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to queer individuals who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color. You are valid, you are worthy, and you are more than enough.

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## **Abstract**

In Search of Self: A Study of Queer Arab Women in the United States Post-Migration

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The following thesis explores the conditions that lead queer Arab women to migrate from their Arab country of origin and how their lives unfold while living in the United States. The framework of this thesis is comprised of literature involving transnational sexualities, queer Middle Eastern studies, queer diaspora and migration, transnational queer of color critique, and queer ethnography. Methods used to obtain data include autoethnography, conducting interviews with queer Arab women in diaspora, and analyzing survey data completed by the same aforementioned population. Common themes of this content analysis include coming out discourses, womanhood in Arab culture, and visibility in the Arab world. Conclusions of this research indicate that queer Arab women in diaspora experience dissonance in longing for representation and visibility while also feeling shame and fear in coming out of the closet.



## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the Arabic language, the term *mithliyah* loosely translates to “same gender loving.” Until recently, however, homosexual Arabs were known as *munharaf*, deviant and perverted. In his case study regarding queer Arab-American women, Mousa (2011) notes that the Arabic language discriminates against queerness as there is no word that clearly translates to “gay” or “homosexual.” (pgs. 22-23, 73) The participants of his study experienced self-doubt and shame due to receiving negative messages regarding dominant LGBTQ culture from the Arab world. Statements such as “It is against God’s will,” “we don’t have that word, we don’t have that,” “for White people only,” and “dirty and bad” are a few of the oppressive comments made by mainstream Arab media and individuals when describing homosexuality. (pgs. 73-74)

In 2009, a collection of forty-one narratives from the perspectives of queer Lebanese women was released by the queer activist group Meem. In this publication entitled *Bareed Mista3jil*, one hundred queer women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five were surveyed. Ninety eight percent noted that coming out is one of the most challenging choices they’ve had to make. Only six of those women were out to their parents while sixty two percent said they would never come out to their parents in order to protect both family and themselves from what could be a damaging confrontation.



I note the previous examples as they provide a general idea of what life can look like for a queer Arab woman who lives in the Middle East. The potential insecurity in their identity and likely feeling of being pulled between two worlds is presumably overwhelming and damaging to their well-being as they live in a world where their cultural upbringing and their sense of self are at odds. Further, they may face consequences such as exile from their families or public shaming if they outwardly express these feelings and concerns. As such, *In Search of Self* seeks to explore the circumstances that lead queer Arab women to migrate from their Arab country of origin and how their lives unfold while living in the United States.

This research explores queer Arab women who are part of the Arab diaspora who live in the United States. Fares (2018) argues that while literature in general has represented a wider variety of sexual diversity among various cultures, it fails to mitigate the problematic narrative associated with Arab sexuality in that “it continues to produce an abusive ethnography occupied with classification and truth claims of Arab and Muslim abuse of women and LGBT in the Middle East.” (pg. 38) Not only is scholarly work regarding queer Arab women limited, but the literature existing on queer women cross-culturally is rather slim. Perhaps part of the reason for this is that the question of “what counts as a lesbian” is often raised in the global human rights sphere. The world is so keen on attaching specific labels to particular characteristics and identities, as King (2008) notes in the following passage from *There Are No Lesbians Here*:

“Within a global gay human rights activism the questions ‘what counts as a lesbian?’ is made transparently powerful within ‘sexual orientation’ as an element of the humanist individual self that is emancipated through inalienable rights as a human...’One particular ‘local’ formation, both geopolitically and chronologically local, the U.S. 1970s feminist version of the ‘Lesbian,’ may unself-consciously be used as the standard, the unmarked category, by a variety of locals and globals, of the term ‘lesbian’...this formation has traveled widely, back through time in various historical and fictional discourse and today via gay and feminist activisms, tourism, media, commerce, and medical, legal, and psychological discourses.” (pg. 41)

Additionally, scholarly work surrounding queer women transnationally is particularly scarce when compared to its male counterpart. The latter statement is one of Dr. Megan Sinnott’s (2009) primary points of discussion in her research. Her essay in *Out in Public* seeks to dismantle a common assumption made in the sexuality studies fields: “the claim that male forms of same-sex sexuality and transgenderism are more prolific, significant, and obvious than female forms cross-culturally.” (pg. 225) Further, she notes, “The claim that female same-sex cultural practices and transgenderism are rarely found lesser versions of male sexuality is so widespread in the literature on sexuality (both historical and cross-cultural studies) that it typically needs only be briefly referred to in texts on the subject in order to confirm and reproduce the presumed truthfulness of the narrative.” (pg. 225)

Given that gender is a system of hierarchy that shapes relationships between men and women in cultural contexts, (Sinnott pg. 226) we must keep it at the forefront as a key component of research and analysis regarding sexual identities and practices. Sinnott also argues, “the paradigm that declares women absent from engagement in same-sex sexual culture is the result of a geographic schema operating within the literature on homoeroticism/same-sex sexuality/transgenderism... This paradigm depends upon a linkage between same-sex sexuality and spaces that are coded as masculine and public within the texts themselves.” (pg. 226) This paradigm in research has created a barren space that *In Search of Self* seeks to begin to fill. Specifically, the project aims to examine the ways in which queer Arab women develop a sense of belonging in diaspora while adding to the limited body of literature available on queer Arab women specifically.

Intersectionality is a key theme in this project in that I examine, “the various ways in which race and gender intersect in shaping structural, political, and representational aspects of violence against women” (pg. 1244) as Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) does in *Mapping the Margins*. When discussing queer Arab women, Mousa (2011) notes it is critical to remember the intersectionality of their multiple minority statuses: “being Arab American in the United States in the face of growing discrimination, being a sexual minority in a heterosexist culture, and the added experience of being female and living in a patriarchal society.” (pg. 1) In line with Mousa’s sentiment, Crenshaw notes, “Because

of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both.” (pg. 1244)

In the second section of her piece, Crenshaw describes the concept of political intersectionality wherein she notes that “women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. The need to split one's political energies between two sometimes opposing groups is a dimension of intersectional disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront.” (pg. 1252) Taking Crenshaw’s framework and applying it to my own work, there are four “political energies” at work in the lives of the population I am researching and speaking with: *queer, Arab, diasporic, and woman*. Each of these identities are fraught with their own disparities, but they all fall under the umbrella of marginalization . This project aims to examine how these four “energies” and their corresponding oppressions intermingle and ultimately form an intersectional identity that is marginalized on four levels of existence.

This research seeks to shed light on the narratives of queer Arab women who have migrated to the United States. Queer bodies are already at a disadvantage in a patriarchal, heteronormative society. Queer women who have migrated to the United States from Middle Eastern countries are inherently more vulnerable due to the cultural degradation, exoticism, and othering they face. (Cainkar 2006; Mohanty 1984; Mousa 2011) This research is guided by the following questions: 1) How do

culture, family, and community influence the identification and lives of queer Arab women? 2) How do these women negotiate their queerness in the context of the diaspora wherein the Middle Eastern discourses of queerness are, according to research and cultural norms, in opposition to those they encounter in the United States? 3) How does gender interact with and affect the queer experiences of this group of women?

This study is significant due to the lack of research currently discussing queer Arab women. The research will contribute to existing literature on queer migration discourses and will highlight the experiences of a very specific group of individuals. The multiple layers of marginalization of this identity illustrate the need for representation in scholarly work. (Mousa 2011; Crenshaw 1991) This research aims to highlight the experiences of queer Arab women in the Middle Eastern diaspora specifically pertaining to the United States.

## **Chapter 2 – A Review of the Literature**

This research explores the experiences of queer Arab women in the Arab diaspora who have migrated to the United States. When examining this population's experiences, I find it necessary to note the significance of transnational sexuality studies, an approach focusing on the connections between sexual discourses, subjectivities, and practices across the globe. What sets discourses of transnational sexuality apart from other critical approaches to studies of sexuality is their focus on global and national locations wherein sexuality has different meanings according to different areas of the world.

Taking into account the aforementioned arguments of Fares (2019) and Mousa (2011), this work begins with a brief description of studies of transnational sexualities and how this field pertains to queer Arab diasporic women. This is followed by an overview of queer Middle Eastern studies. The next section focuses on studies in queer diaspora and migration. Following this is an overview of transnational queer of color critique as this is the theoretical framework through which this thesis will be researched and composed. The final section introduces queer ethnography so as to lead into the ethnographic methodology of this project.

### **Transnational Sexualities**

The field of transnational sexualities uses a critical approach that emphasizes the connections between sexual discourses, practices, and subjectivities across national and international contexts. What sets this field apart from others in sexuality studies is its focus on international settings wherein sexuality is infused with cultural meaning. Equally important in this approach is the viewpoint that sexuality is the way in which transnational hegemonies often form. The field primarily focuses on identities that are marginalized and seeks to “queer” the process of information production by interrogating the practices and politics that create these marginalities in the first place. As Evelyn Blackwood (2005) states, “transnational sexualities’ insist on the recognition that particular genders and sexualities are shaped by a large number of processes implicated in globalization, including capitalism, diasporic movements, political economies of state, and the disjunctive flow of meanings produced across these sites.” (pg. 221)

In order to understand the historical progression of sexuality in America, it would be wise to observe the argument Povinelli & Chauncey (1999) posit. To them, we cannot begin to understand this progression without taking into account the analysis of transnational movements and the mobility of gender and sexuality. Queerness in particular is now a very globalized concept that travels all over and is no longer exclusively Western or affiliated with specific political movements. As Povinelli & Chauncey argue, “These movements clearly affected the sexual practices, subjectivities, and politics of the immigrants’ homelands and host nations.” (pg. 440) Povinelli & Chauncey discuss this spread of culture and political movement across the globe, noting that scholars are well-aware of “the unevenness of these global circulations” due to

material that is “still regulated by state-based law, citizenship, and markets and by local notions and practices of embodiment and sociality.” (pg. 442)

In a similar vein as Povinelli & Chauncey, Patton & Sanchez-Eppler (2002) describe the global movement and existence of sexuality and begin by noting the coupling of Adam and Eve that set forth heteronormative narratives and expectations. They seek to discover, “how a variety of bodies involved in the gyrations of postmodernity have borne the weight of this connection, and to what effect.” (pg. 2) To these editors, “Sexuality is not only not essence, not timeless, it is also not fixed in place: sexuality is on the move. With this new clarity, we are in a better position to analyze the valences of body-in-place and consider the transformations in sexualities that move between – indeed, may have been produced at – the interstices of specific geopolitical territories.” (pg. 2) Location and movement have become significant factors in discussions regarding sexuality as we reflect on how notions of home/origin and return are affected by sexual and gender identity. As Patton & Sanchez-Eppler also state, “When a practitioner of ‘homosexual acts,’ or a body that carries any of many queering marks moves between officially designated spaces – nation, region, metropole, neighborhood...intricate realignments of identity, politics, and desire take place.” (pg. 3) These realignments can affect almost every aspect of a queer individual’s existence depending on not only where they are, but *who* they are.

### **Queer Middle Eastern Studies**



The field of queer Middle Eastern studies is a constant work-in-progress that continues to shift as it attracts more scholars and researchers. However, there is still a lack of source material regarding queer Arab women. Perhaps this is due to homosexuality being viewed as a Western cultural construct. In accordance, I find that it is crucial to examine Edward Said's well-known approach of Orientalism in order to grasp key aspects of queerness within Middle Eastern studies. Naber (2011) notes, "More than thirty years ago, Edward Said argued that 'Orientalism' is a European fabrication of 'the East,' that 'the Orient' is shaped by European imperialist attitudes and assumes that Eastern or Oriental people can be defined in terms of cultural or religious essences that are invulnerable to historical change." (pg. 80) Orientalism positions the East and the West in what Said (1978) argues is an unfortunate, impassable war between what is Other and what is "us." Further, he suggests the representations of Islam further perpetuate Orientalism wherein unflinching traditions steeped in oppression and shame are incompatible with more modernized civilization.

These assumedly harsh traditions appear to take a significantly larger toll on women as opposed to men. Darraj (2011) suggests that existing as an Arab woman in the United States has become confusing and complicated as they may experience sexism on two levels. Arab women often find themselves being portrayed as one identity in the personal realm and as another in the political realm. (pg. 250) Family, community, and tradition are key components of Arab cultures, which account for how Arab women are seen in the personal realm. Concurrently, American society and government regard the image of Arab women as "a way to confirm the alleged inferiority of Arab culture and

Islamic religion: the backward nature of the ‘other’ becomes a confirmation of the dominance and superiority of the self.” (pg. 256) This is to say that Arab women in the Western sphere are often viewed as less-than and secondary to men.

Alsayyad (2008) describes common themes amongst Arab lesbians who were interviewed in her thesis. First, she notes that the women described themselves as “living for others” wherein their lives are constructed through a “very delicate balancing act” due to familial obligations, concern over what others will think, and, most importantly, preserving honor. (pg. 116) Second, most of the participants in her study wish to live a life that is composed of traditional heteronormative characteristics such as monogamy, marriage, and children. However, very few of the women planned to come out to their families or even divulge their cohabitating with their romantic partners. This places them in a “model of quiet resistance” that shows how some queer Arab women wish to maintain their close relationships while avoiding the Western narratives of visibility and coming out. (pg. 117) Third, Alsayyad states there is a “black sheep” mentality that many queer Arab women feel as they exist in their families and queer communities. (pg. 117) Alsayyad notes that this sense of feeling like an outsider permeated the lives of all of her interviewees.

For queer Arabs, coming out is not always considered the final goal or stage in coming to terms with one’s sexual identity. Scull & Mouse (2017) argue coming out should not be used as the sole benchmark for self-acceptance as legal issues, violence, prejudice, and breaking of close familial relationships must also be taken into account when choosing to disclose one’s identity. (pg. 1229) Naber (2011) notes the influence of

Western discourses on Arab cultural frameworks of gender, sexuality, and marriage and how they are ever-changing to align with current socioeconomic standards. Additionally, she argues that newer European-influenced ideas of gender and sexuality have replaced the “ambiguous, fluid sexual attitudes” that were prominent in previous Islamic rule. (p. 85)

The queer Arab women in Mousa’s (2011) study describe their supposedly uncommon existence of identifying as both queer and Arab. One participant stated, “That's what's unique about it, the fact of our existence feels sometimes impossible, like it wasn't supposed to be possible. It wasn't supposed to exist.” (pg. 96) Perhaps this very “impossible” notion is the reason as to why there is limited research on the topic, particularly pertaining to queer Arab women who migrate from the Middle East to the United States. As Jones & Tell (2010) state, the Arab world is not a monolith where sweeping blanket statements can be made nor can all nations be assumed to be alike in their customs and norms. (pg. 133)

Fares (2018) argues that while literature in general has represented a wider variety of sexual diversity among various cultures, it fails to mitigate the problematic narrative associated with Arab sexuality in that “it continues to produce an abusive ethnography occupied with classification and truth claims of Arab and Muslim abuse of women and LGBT in the Middle East.” (pg. 38) Here, I reiterate Mousa’s (2011) note that we must remember the intersectionality of their various minority identities: “being Arab American in the United States in the face of growing discrimination, being a sexual minority in a heterosexist culture, and the added experience of being female and living in a patriarchal

society.” (pg. 1) If we do not examine queer Arab women through this critical intersectionality lens, we risk minimizing or altogether missing aspects of these women’s lives and experiences that are significant to their existence.

### **Queer Diaspora / Migration**

Given that the individuals being studied consist of sexual minorities, the study of queer diaspora and migration is relevant to this research in that the group is comprised of women of color who are migrants. Regarding migrant women of color, Puar (1994) states, “they are as moving subjects the most vulnerable, the most exposed in terms of migration, displacement, exile, war, and so on.” (pg. 87) Queer diasporic individuals continue to be under pressure to perform as ideal American subjects even as their queerness is used to regard them as terrorists. Puar notes that as a response, a sort of “double movement” has begun where one of the following instances occurs: either the narratives of Orientalist sexualities are reproduced by homonormative folds of patriotism, or there is a reclamation of sexual “perversities” of brown terrorists. (Puar 1994, pg 169)

To provide a fuller context for this field of study, I note here that queer migration scholarship seeks to highlight and theorize topics and individuals that have continuously been erased from the fields of both queer studies and migration studies. The themes tying these histories together are that they “reflect both ‘alienation from white gay communities’ and ‘histories of multiple diasporas’ forged through colonialism and capitalism.” (Luibhéid 2008, pg. 171) In a similar vein, Rodriguez (2017) argues that queer migrants are “at the center of issues of power, persecution, and existential angst”

and that there is no hope of returning to their homelands once they have fled. He also notes diasporas are constructed by two main themes: “The first is through scattering and diversity and the second is through exile and home.” Further, diaspora has become synonymous with travel and leisure due to media. (pg. 111) Rodriguez then notes the concept of home is one migrants may be forced to leave behind due to the heteronormative structures that are upheld, thus threatening the safety and very existence of queer individuals. (pg. 111)

### **Transnational Queer of Color Critique**

The field of queer migration and diaspora studies is informed by transnational queer of color critique. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson (2004) notes it is not enough to simply recognize the existence of queer people of color: “In this moment of transgressions and regulations, we must approach these subjects as sites of knowledge.” (pg. 148) Therefore, this section will provide a brief description of queer of color analysis. Queer of color critique “interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.” (pg. 149)

Gaining its name from the very title of the aforementioned 2004 work by Ferguson, a queer of color (QOC) critique refers to the interdisciplinary body of scholarship on the dynamic between hegemony and resistance that mold the lives of queer people of color. (Brockenbrough 2015, pg. 29) By interacting and engaging with

the fields of queer studies and women of color feminism, QOC critique has created an analytical lens wherein it specifically highlights the marginalization of queer people of color while also identifying “strategies of resistance to account for the shifting exigencies of the lives of queers of color.” (Brockenbrough, pg. 30-31) What distinguishes a QOC critique from other frameworks is that its primary sources of data are the lived experiences of queer people of color. This provides a nuanced and fascinating viewpoint for studying the encounters of queers of color and their “resistance against multiple systems of power in any number of contexts.” (Brockenbrough, pg. 31)

Ferguson (2004) notes that while QOC critique values materiality, it rejects any ideology that perpetuates Marxism, liberalism pluralism, and/or nationalism. These three philosophies focus on obtaining property as the main intent of class and racial division while queer of color analysis instead chooses to understand nation and capital as “the outcome of manifold intersections that contradict the idea of the liberal nation-state and capital as sites of resolution, perfection, progress, and confirmation.” (pg. 2) Additionally, Ferguson states QOC critique is not an outsider in the analysis of culture but instead dissects cultural fields from within so as to account for the historical authenticity of the queer subject(s) being researched. (pg. 4)

When thinking about the topic of queer Arab women, Albrecht (2018) argues that a QOC critique must be a primary component in the analysis of Arab and Arab-American history. Further, she notes that QOC critique emphasizes the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality with a focus on how these concepts associate and depart from nationalist beliefs and customs. According to Albrecht, “The degree to which Arabs,

Middle Easterners, and/or Muslims can be said to value women's equality or LGBT rights, for example, correlates with their deservingness of citizenship in the global north and national sovereignty in their countries of origin." (pg. 84) Additionally, she notes that despite being misconstrued as a more recent notion, sexuality and gender identity have long existed as the basis of racial perception of Arabs in the United States as they are such crucial constructions of difference. (pg. 84)

### **Queer Ethnography**

Seeing as this project is part ethnographic in nature, I find it necessary to provide a brief overview of what queer ethnography can look like. According to Rooke (2009), queer ethnography is not quite as simple as ethnography focused on queer subjects. Rather, it must question and take queer theory very seriously in order to challenge the typical strategies of ethnographic research, specifically the stability and cohesiveness of self and its performance in writing and research. (pg. 150) As Rooke states, "To queer ethnography then, is to bend the established orientation of ethnography in its method, ethics, and reflexive philosophical principles." (pg. 150)

I believe it to be critical to mention the criticisms of this research method. Rooke notes that ethnography can be a "messy methodology" and that it has been questioned and contested following anthropological postmodernism in the late 1980s. (pg. 150) Arguments against ethnography discuss issues such as, "the ethnographer's positionality, the possibilities and limitations of knowing and understanding, the method's lack of 'scientificity,' its potentially exploitative nature, its historical production of the colonial

“Other,” the perils of representation, and the relationship between theory and practice.” (pg. 150) More specifically, ethnography’s engagement with queer theory has a history that “problematizes the epistemological and ontological comfort and coherence of identity categories.” (pg. 155)

Still, queer ethnography manages to find significance and a place of uniqueness in the realm of research. Rooke states that in her own research, she was forced to reexamine her own biases and assess how her own experiences as a queer individual may have affected her perceptions of findings in the research. She notes that, “these difficulties were often guiding principles in pushing my analysis forward. They challenged my preconceptions of contemporary lesbian identity.” (pg. 155) Ultimately, Rooke concludes that queering ethnography and conducting this research must do justice to the ways in which people exist as their sexual identities and interrogating the ways in which knowledge is produced and transmitted when discussing the lives of queer individuals. (pg. 157) I find this information relevant to this research in that I will be keeping in mind my own experiences, as I will refer to in the following positionality statement.

### **Autoethnography**

Finally, this thesis contains an autoethnography in which I share my personal experiences as a queer Arab-American woman and how themes of family, honor, and tradition have been interwoven in my life. I believe autoethnography is an appropriate methodology for this research as, according to Butz & Besio (2009), “autoethnographies are necessarily *trans*-cultural communications, articulated in relation to self *and* a wider



social field that includes an audience of ‘others.’” (pg. 1660) In any given style of autoethnography, the author is publicly adapting and analyzing their own self-image and self-awareness as a means to shape understandings of their surroundings and the world at large.

Butz & Besio suggest that there are three main challenges to writing autoethnographies. First, there is the risk of running into solipsism, the concept wherein a person believes their mind and set of beliefs is the only sure way of existence. Autoethnography can especially descend into tricky territory when the author bypasses what they know from fieldwork and research and instead writes from a place of “knowing” the subject matter as it pertains to their personal life. Second, autoethnography significantly relies on identity, thus self-narration becomes a liability to expose self-identity. This is particularly evident in autoethnographies that self-represent to the author’s oppressor(s.) Third, there are typically multiple audiences for autoethnographies and it can be difficult to engage them all at once. Butz & Besio state, “the need to communicate effectively and strategically to this variety of audiences necessarily influences our constitution as researchers and the knowledge that we produce, not always in ways we are aware of or would like.” (pg. 1661) Autoethnography thus provides a place of reflexivity for examining the effects of said influences on the literature and knowledge that they produce *and* on their being a subject of research.

My own sense of self is constructed by my own working knowledge of my culture and identity, but also by the research I continue to conduct. The narrative of the queer Arab woman, particularly one living post-migration, is not a monolith. My individual

experiences may share overlapping themes with those of the film I will be referencing and the participants in the surveys and interviews in this study. Simultaneously, my existence as an Arab-American born in the United States will likely highlight the significance of migration among the lives of the participants in my study and in the film. This section is followed by a brief statement of positionality so as to provide readers a glimpse of my thought process.

### **Statement of Positionality**

As a queer Arab-American woman, I recognize my own biases and experiences have the capacity to interfere with this study. I believe that my roots in Arab culture and my understanding of familial loyalty will establish a foundation of trust and a sense of familiarity for the participants I spoke with. I do feel an exceptionally strong connection to this particular topic given both my heritage and identity and continue to strive to maintain as much of a “neutral” stance as possible as I have carried out this work.

Simultaneously, I am aware of the contrasting elements between the lives of these women and my own, particularly with two specific variables that are significant themes in this study. I was born and raised in the United States and am a first generation Arab-American in my family. I did not migrate to this country from the Middle East. Additionally, I am “out” in terms of my queerness to some people in my family and all of my social circles. Some of the times in which I have felt unsafe in my identity have been mitigated by the people around me in which I was supported rather than shunned.

None of these similarities or differences are inherently positive or negative as they do not affect my intellectual ability to accurately record and analyze this body of research. My connections to the topic at hand could potentially be viewed as having a skewed opinion, but I personally believe that these cultural ties simply allow for deeper understanding of the themes presented in the research material. This creates an opportunity for a nuanced and well-rounded critique of the material that is vibrant and original. To allow readers to understand my connections to this topic, I have elected to include an autoethnographic chapter on my experiences as a queer Arab woman.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

As a precursor to any data collection, my identity as a queer Arab-American woman was disclosed to all individuals who considered partaking in this research. My proximity to this topic may have created a sense of belonging and safety for some participants and thus produced a more fruitful narrative that results in a rich body of work. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained and the participants of this research were not compensated in any way. The research uses a fully qualitative approach and employed the use of surveys and interviews to obtain data from queer Arab women who were able to participate in this project. These surveys and interviews were led by a specific set of questions (see Appendix 1) with the final question allowing participants to share anything else they deemed relevant to this study. A mixed methods approach was then taken to analyze said data from the surveys and interviews. By this I mean that the responses from each of my interview and survey participants, my autoethnography, the narratives of the film participants, and the cited literature were all compared and analyzed for adjoining themes and similarities. The interview process was conducted with a semi-structured approach. The interviews sought to highlight the experiences of each participant by presenting questions that encouraged them to recall childhood memories, engage with current news and literature, and ask me personal

questions about my own experiences that further inspired them to dive deeper in their responses. In general, the interview process flowed much more seamlessly and naturally and felt more like an informative conversation rather than a formal qualitative interview.

The participants were queer Arab women who have migrated from the Middle East to the United States who are at least eighteen (18) years old. A survey was distributed throughout communities in queer and Arab spaces across the United States. Snow-ball sampling was also used to connect with potential participants, a request that I made in my initial dissemination of the project. Some participants who had already taken the survey shared the link on their social media pages and forwarded their email correspondence with me to friends and other networks. Other individuals were found through extensive research into university organizations and word-of-mouth recommendations from professors across different universities. I then sent emails to the Arab and LGBTQ student groups at these universities and included information about the thesis as well as the list of questions and the link to the survey on Qualtrics. The final source of recruitment was a Facebook page I created that specifically targeted Middle Eastern people in the United States and was circulated through my own social media as well as the social media accounts of friends and colleagues. Recruitment began in September 2021 and lasted approximately six months before it became evident that I would not receive any more responses as the survey was accessed but not completed by ten individuals. Additionally, as I will discuss in chapter 5, only three out of thirteen prospective interview participants actually finalized and completed the interview, which lasted approximately 1 hour.

This survey consisted of twenty-four (24) short answer questions regarding age, timeline, identity, family, relationship status, and migration (see Appendix A.) In order to take the survey, participants must identify which Arab country they migrated from and confirm they live in the United States. The survey seeks to gather general data pertaining to the relationship between the identities of queer woman and Arab. At the end of the survey, contact information was listed for participants to reach out to should they be interested in partaking in an interview for a deeper discussion. The interview participants were given an opportunity to share their personal narratives while remaining anonymous as the names of these participants have been changed to protect their identities. Interview participants were audio recorded for note-taking purposes and were informed of such prior to the start of the conversation.

The interview/survey questions were designed to be approachable without feeling the need to do external research. I wanted participants to feel comfortable sharing their most authentic selves, knowing that their identities were being protected and that their stories were valued. Some questions were fairly short and simple, such as asking about the age and pronouns of the individual. Other questions encouraged more thoughtful and descriptive answers. For example, the questions about gender and queer representation in homelands and how this compares to representation in the United States typically prompted longer, more extensive responses that often carried over to answering other questions. Questions about geographic origins took mere seconds to answer, while questions inquiring about coming out stories were complex and took participants significantly more time to explain.

In addition to the autoethnography I have previously alluded to, excerpts from the film *I Exist* are also included in this study. *I Exist* is a 2004 documentary that focuses on the lives of several queer Middle Eastern people living in the United States. I consider this film to be an artifact of the overall study. As per the official description of the film, “*I Exist* gives voice to a group that has long remained silent out of shame and fear.” These participants come from varying countries and religious backgrounds, some of which may correlate with the participants from the surveys and interviews. Themes from the interviews presented in this documentary were compared to those found in the interviews and surveys conducted in this study.

#### Chapter 4: On a Personal Note - An Autoethnography

“Like life, peace begins with women. We are the first to forge lines of alliance and collaboration across conflict divides.”

“In every single culture I encountered, there were always women who defied cultural norms to do what they believed was right for them. This phenomenon has never been related to how rich, poor, successful or not successful the woman may be.”

- Zainab Salbi

I reflect on my childhood in an Arab family and recall my *amtis* (aunts) and *Teta* (grandmother) sitting around the kitchen table stuffing *koosa* with ground beef and rice, their knuckles kneading the mixture before filling the hollowed squash shells so fully that they would almost explode once they were boiled in the tomato broth. I remember the endless jibber jabber of *amtis* Randa and Violette, talking a mile-a-minute in their native tongue presumably about the latest drama between the in-laws. *Teta* would occasionally chime in but she was mostly stern and focused, her fingers expertly sealing the edges of squash into the rice just right. I could tell when she would become frustrated with her two daughters and their gossip for she would snap something akin to, “Get moving or I’ll kick you out of the kitchen and finish it myself” in the harsh tone we were all familiar with.



She didn't speak much English, but I knew exactly what she was communicating every single time she addressed me.

*Teta* was a force to be reckoned with, an often disgruntled woman who migrated to the United States after my father and his brothers established a home base in Northern Virginia. She was stubborn, cold, and often threw her slippers at my cousins and I when we were inevitably too loud according to her standards. *Teta*, though, was strong; she had lived through various wartimes and raised her seven children through the Arab Israeli War of 1973. Her daughters, my father's sisters, Violette, Randa, and Ghada would gather around the patio table, smoking cigarettes and sipping *qahwa* while *jaj be riz* (chicken and rice) roasted in the oven. Their seemingly carefree spirits matched their laughing fits as they sang along to classic Arab songs. While my aunts were often at odds with *Teta*, all four women shared a common passion and commitment to live by: family.

These are the Arab women I am familiar with: strongly devoted to family and traditions but having dreams of their own that, unfortunately, never came to fruition. They migrated to the United States at various points in their lives, though all were under the age of 20 when they arrived. Still, they had goals of going to college and having careers. Their futures had been decided upon, though, by their parents who had already arranged marriages for them. Randa married a first cousin of hers, a common practice of older days, and Violet was matched to a wealthy businessman at a young age. Ghada, however, refused to marry her match and instead married a man she loved, a choice she was chastised for throughout the years. Still, these women were intelligent, bright, and

outspoken and continue to lead fulfilling lives while holding their customs and familial traditions close to heart.

I present the examples of my strong *amtis* and *Teta* to counteract the common tropes that the West speaks of when referring to Arab women. In the Western world, media outlets often spew the narrative that Arab women overseas need to be saved from patriarchal norms that are often seen as archaic. In fact, Leila, one of the participants of this research process noted her own disdain for the West's interpretation of Arab women.

“The one issue I have about how people perceive womanhood in the Middle East in general is that it's like always like people are just always spent with lies about women being oppressed and women being very submissive and like, very domestic and all of these things and always have this like notion of Arab women need to be saved from oppressive Arab men.”

Leila's words echo a familiar narrative: women are assumed to be meek and voiceless, unable to stand up for themselves and being forced to do as their male-centric families command. While I will acknowledge that this is rooted in some truth when examining societal standards of many years ago, times have absolutely changed for women in the Middle East but the Western world has yet to catch onto this. In fact, Arab women are often fetishized in the West for presumably being innocent and docile. I have personally encountered this on a multitude of levels throughout my life. I have received disgusting messages on dating apps from men claiming they would like to assert their dominance over a quiet little Arab girl, thinking they can do whatever they wish with me.

I have been met with surprise and utter shock when disclosing my culture on first dates and in professional settings with these individuals exclaiming, “Oh! But you’re so outspoken! You don’t wear a veil. I never would have known. You don’t seem Arab to me.” These very assumptions are commonplace and heavily contribute to the narrative of the helpless Middle Eastern woman often portrayed in the West.

However, there are patriarchal standards that come from within the family itself. My uncles have often told me throughout the years that I will make a wonderful wife and a great mother, despite my consistent comments of not being interested in getting married or having children. You see, I am seen as different in my family: I was the first daughter of the Haddad family to graduate from college. I have almost always had a career in the liberal arts realm, a far cry from the desired fields of medicine or law. I have no desire to “honor” my parents with grandchildren, which, ironically, my father is completely supportive of. Perhaps the most differentiating factor of my identity, however, is that I am a queer woman.

I recognized I was bisexual when I was around 15 or 16 years old. I remember my first gay crush on my friend, along with the confusion and what I now recognize as internalized homophobia that constantly circulated through my mind. I had plenty of queer friends and knew many adults who were publicly out, but I never thought that I would identify the same way. I kept my feelings about my friend to myself for months as I knew she came from a very religious and conservative family. I was terrified of what our mutual friends would think of me if they knew the truth. I would later discover how

supportive they were as I slowly began to come out to certain friends, how kind and accepting their words were and the sense of safety I felt.

I use the word *safety* here in a very nuanced context, for I don't recall believing I was truly in danger when I came out. I did, however, experience immense fear at the mere thought of telling my parents the truth about my identity. My mother, a native Washingtonian and Ashkenazi Jew, had previously made some slanderous comments about lesbians that, understandably, had spiked my sense of discomfort. However, my concern for her opinion paled in comparison to the dread and shame I felt in the mere possibility of coming out to my highly traditional, vaguely conservative, and family-oriented Arab father. As I will touch on in the next chapter, I knew there was a difference between my white friends coming forward with their sexuality versus me doing the same. For people of color, coming out can often be complicated in terms of navigating the intersectionality of racism and homophobia. Additionally, it can be painful and even devastating. Naturally, I chose to not take that risk and instead kept this part of my identity hidden from my parents for the following decade.

It wasn't until the COVID-19 Pandemic of 2020 that I even remotely considering revealing my sexual orientation to my parents. I had seen what happened in my extended family when my cousin's sexuality was speculated about, how he was ostracized and ridiculed behind his back. While I acknowledged that there was the potential for this very thing to happen to me, the world was at a turning point in which issues of gender and race were at the forefront of conversations in society. It was in the spring of 2021 that I decided that as a graduate student in the social justice realm, I needed to come forward

with my parents. I felt I had a duty as a queer person of color to start a conversation that could educate and inform, even when I was fully aware of the risk. I could have been kicked out, disowned, and shunned by my parents. Thankfully, this was not the case. My father, being the most forward-thinking of his siblings, was surprisingly understanding and supportive. He admitted that he still didn't quite understand what it meant and how I could be attracted to more than one gender, but he was quick to remind me of his love and care for me.

Interestingly, my white, Jewish mother had more questions and comments for me than my father. Some of her inquiries were more personal and I declined to answer several of them. I find it intriguing that the white woman here was the one to ask questions and express a greater overall interest while the Arab man was fairly nonchalant about it. I believe this speaks to how the Western world views coming out as this major event that may be carefully planned and executed and is sometimes followed by celebratory gestures and greetings from family. It is pertinent here to note the coming out discourses surrounding white individuals versus Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC.) In fact, one of my interview participants shared her commentary on this very topic as I will touch on in a later chapter. The conversation around coming out in the West is often synonymous with a liberal mindset where differences and diversity are supposed to be celebrated, though often at a very surface level and without any further exploration. This is consistent with Decena (2008) wherein he states:

“Taking for granted that all LGBTQ people should come out of the closet

is consistent with a neoliberal interpretation of coming out characteristic of the current political climate in the United States. Instead of being the beginning of a project of social transformation—as coming out was understood in the early days of gay liberation—individual self-realization through speech has been severed from collective social change. Today, one comes out not to be radical or change the world but to be a ‘normal’ gay subject.<sup>3</sup>”

What’s more, coming out as a queer white individual looks very different from coming out while being queer *and* BIPOC. Race and ethnicity already play an integral part in how society subconsciously categorizes people before meeting them. Light skin is associated with goodness (i.e. think of the term “fair-skinned” and therein lies the problem) while individuals with deeper skin tones are often seen in a negative light before even opening their mouths. Similarly, those who have defining non-white features are seen as Others and therefore bad while those with predominantly European features are seen in the opposite way. Taking this into the realm of queerness, white queers are “good queers,” acceptable and fair. Simultaneously, everyone else is automatically problematic and not enough.

My experiences as a queer Arab-American woman are not unique, for queer friends of mine who are BIPOC also feel similar sentiments about their lives and existence. The push-and-pull facet of wanting to maintain identity while also celebrating culture is often exhausting and confusing. At times, it feels as though you are splitting

yourself and have to pick one half or the other to carry you through a given day's events. For example, my Arab half is much more predominant, dare I say important, when I know I will be with family. Simultaneously, I often try to tamper down my BIPOC identity in queer spaces, though this rarely works for long because I am so passionate about cultures and transnational studies that this inevitably comes up in many conversations. It is often a solemn, somber existence to live as queer and BIPOC in a world where people often think in very black-and-white and yes-or-no terms. No two days are alike, for you never know which part of your identity seeks to be nurtured and acknowledged until the time comes to tend to it. We carry on, seeking to be accepted in all of our communities, acknowledging that circumstances will never be perfect, and continuing to grapple with the different versions of ourselves that exist. I continue to seek peace among my different identities, and hope that one day I will find it.

## **Chapter 5: Voices on Queerness, Womanhood, & Being Arab**

Before diving into the interviews and survey responses, I wish to share how the data collection affected the emerging themes and final results of this thesis. The process of obtaining participants for interviews and the survey was seemingly endless in some regards. The survey was disseminated over eight months to roughly eighty LGBTQIA and/or Arab student associations across the United States, professors of varying disciplines from a myriad of universities, journalists, newsletters, podcasts, religious centers, social media content creators, and in queer support groups on social media. The interview participants I worked with shared it with their circles as a means of snowball sampling. Additionally, a social media page for the thesis was created and shared to algorithmically- targeted audiences in the Middle East and in the United States. This survey and the thesis information in general was shared with scores of individuals. Additionally, my identity as a queer Arab woman was always the first piece of information shared with any source.

As you will see, the final results yielded only three interviews. Ten prospective participants disappeared from communication in the days prior to or day of our scheduled interview. Survey responses and interviews that had been almost guaranteed were then replaced by emails stating that the respondent was concerned with being identified despite the pseudonym and anonymity of the survey. This discomfort of being outed



became a common theme in the responses I did receive. I share this information to provide context as to how difficult it is for queer Arab women to speak about their experiences, even in the presence of another queer Arab woman. The following accounts are few but mighty, rich with cultural context and details of identity and sense of self.

### **Yasmeen**

Yasmeen is a thirty-three-year-old queer individual from Palestine. She notes that she is comfortable responding to any and all pronouns and identifies as a “tomboy.”

“The way I experience myself, I tend to present more masculine. I don't really feel that comfortable in dresses or things but I love wearing flower prints. I like more like masculine cuts, but I feel like my personality and some of the traits I pick up in relationships are much more feminine. So yeah, I feel like I definitely flow between but don't really identify authentically and genuinely as non binary or trans.”

When asked about her sexual orientation, Yasmeen said she felt as though she tended to be interested in people who were the “inverse” of her, with “more masculine presenting and feminine personality traits.” In general, she noted that she steers away from men because she doesn't feel a connection to their souls the way she does with women and non-binary individuals. For her, part of her attraction to someone is deeply rooted in how she can “vibe” with their personality and connect with them on an emotional level. She doesn't particularly care as much about the corporeal form so much as the emotional and spiritual being of the person.

When discussing what queer representation looks like in Palestine, Yasmeen notes that she wants queerness to be more visible in her family. To her family, she is simply a tomboy. She remarks:

“As long as you don’t speak about it, it doesn’t really exist. At least that’s our household, because there are plenty of gay ass people in my family. Like, one of my cousins was outed to his grandmother...There is just a lot of weirdness that I’ve been exposed to in different ways, but I feel like the silence of it is real, like the ability to speak of it, the ability to talk about it, and it not be like something that should be inherently shameful. I think that would be, from my experiences at least, a big, big thing...what I would like is to be visibly weird because I’m really gay, but none of my family fucks with me because I’m not out to them. So as long as I don’t ever say I’m gay, they can’t do shit to me.”

A trope that Yasmeen comments on, and that I have personally experienced, is the feeling of having to carefully maneuver around the thoughts and behaviors of others in one’s family and community. She notes how women are expected to come home and do all of the housework while potentially maintaining jobs and/or caring for large families. To her, the responsibilities of being a woman in her culture are so arduous that she was surprised her mom and aunts hadn’t collapsed. Further, she discusses the frustration of trying to appease those around her whilst knowing they will gossip about her regardless of her actions:

“It's just fucking exhausting because the tip of the iceberg is meeting the day-to-day needs of your family. Then, you have to deal with all the catty bullshit. You have to navigate what other people say, how other people tear you down and pick you to pieces and nitpick you.”

She goes on to discuss what it's like to marry outside of your immediate community and how marrying into a different village can result in emotional duress. She says that hopefully, you marry someone in your village and thus have relatives there. Unfortunately, many of her cousins marry outside of their neighboring areas and don't have the tightly interwoven relationships they are used to in their circles. This comes back to a theme of having to adjust to what people are saying about them while also being isolated and away from their families.

“They're just the outsider in a village that's already set up to perfectly talk shit about them and then they're isolated. A lot of my cousins' wives that come and live with the family in the village like... they have to have such big skin just because they're picked apart by everyone.

Additionally, she notes a theme of women having to be “incredibly resilient” in the face of male-dominated spaces.

“A lot of the other women in my family really just end up having to like, lean on relationships with men to like, get with it, and get their needs met. And so it's like, if those relationships don't work out for them, they can have a lot of really fucked up experiences. Even my little sister just escaped my father. Like, she had to go

marry a dude that she didn't really like, and who has a shitty mom, but she's so young and she's just trying to lean on any relationship she could get to get out...You have to be able to multitask and never associate any of your needs to your time...and then you have to rely on the relationship of some powerful male to be able to stay safe and have a good quality of life despite working fucking hard as a breadwinner, as a housekeeper, as a parent, and as a child to elderly parents.”

Yasmeen finds that women are expected to be a sort of catch-all in her homeland’s community. Her own mother has been turning down offers of returning to the village to live rent-free even as she struggles with housing, for she knows that the underlying thought process of her coming back is that she will provide childcare for the younger children in the family. Further, Yasmeen notes that money comes with more expectations when you are a woman.

“There's always strings attached to it, and those strings are way more intensely applied on women than they are in men. If a dude needed money, he could go ask and then the money would be given and *halas* they would be done with it or whatever. Maybe they don't give him the money. Like if a woman needs money, all of a sudden like she should earn it..My aunt is very poor and if she needs a little bit of extra money she goes to my uncle's house to clean his home for him. Why would you make your sister clean your home for you and pay her for that? That's ridiculous. But not like call that labor, right? No, she comes over and I give her money, and I'm not gonna say that I'm paying her to clean my home because

I'm not. I'm giving her money. But there's this underlying expectation that she's gonna clean my home.”

In terms of her identities, Yasmeen does not feel that her queerness and Arabness necessarily contradict each other. She procures spaces for queer people in the MENA (Middle Eastern North African) communities in Chicago and is “pretty deep in that organizing work.” That being said, she does note that she sometimes feels sadness and exclusion in Arab spaces because of the visible markers of her queerness. She says that while she could dress differently and be more accepted in those spaces, she knows she wouldn't feel comfortable as she wouldn't be her authentic self. Instead, she chooses to accept that people aren't always willing to engage and interact with her.

Yasmeen's story is quite interesting in that her mother is also queer. Her mother spent time in prison after leaving her village around the age of thirteen. She was homeless for most of her young adult life and was heavily involved in sex work and drugs, which Yasmeen suggests is why she was arrested. While in prison, her mother fell in love with another woman. After finishing her sentence, she began to rebuild her life and is the most open-minded person in Yasmeen's family who everybody confides their secrets to. Due to her mom's queerness, Yasmeen felt little to no discomfort coming out to her as she had actively defended her daughter's privacy when questioned about her sexuality time and time again. Yasmeen's brother, on the other hand, was a different story. She said that she was nervous about coming out to him, but that he ultimately figured it out and was “very chill” about it and showed great support.

In terms of the Western representation of Arabs in general, Yasmeen is pretty tired of how the West perceives Middle Eastern people to be “barbaric..look at how homophobic they are.” Further, she is “not down for my representation to be weaponized against my community, regardless of how hard and complex that relationship can be with them...I know other SWANA (South West Asian/ North African) folks will have me and hold me in ways that white folks won’t and I’m not about to throw my people out just so I can be tokenized by them.”

Ultimately, Yasmeen feels that she “just exists” and doesn’t necessarily “think through all of the nuances of how challenging it is to be queer.” She says that it is very helpful to live in a large and queer-friendly area like Chicago versus living in South Dakota, where she originally migrated to and didn’t have any support networks. She finds that “just existing” has helped her develop the queer spaces she has been working on. She has been able to bring many people together by advertising via smaller platforms and helps introduce individual “little pockets of a couple people” to each other. In her personal life, she remains relatively inactive on social media and blocks most of her posts from her family as she doesn’t want them to know her business. This selective sharing of self and desire for privacy continued in the other interviews I conducted, as you will see in the next section.

## **Leila**

Leila is a nineteen-year-old Jordanian woman who is currently a university student and has been in the United States for a little over a year at the time of this interview. She identifies as a cisgender woman and uses she/her pronouns. For her, gender was a binary concept until she reached the United States and encountered non-binary individuals, which was a “big culture shock” for her. Leila notes she only recently accepted she was queer at eighteen, though she “always knew deep down” that something was different. When asked about her sexual orientation, Leila says she prefers to not label herself in one way or another.

“I do feel like sexuality is a spectrum and usually when someone asks me, someone that I trust, I would say I'm bisexual. Recently, I've kind of been thinking maybe I'm pansexual because I don't think I have any preferences. But in general, I don't really like putting a label on it because I think that puts a lot of pressure on me to put myself in a box.”

Leila notes that she grew up around a significant amount of homophobia. Leila recalls a classmate confiding in her about her queerness, but this young woman never came out to anyone else due to the backlash she knew she would receive. She then notes how a good friend of hers came out as bisexual to her in their senior year of high school, revealing that she had been dating the aforementioned classmate in secret for some time. This theme of dating-in-secret became common amongst people in the Jordanian queer community, who commonly congregated in a particular neighborhood comprised of restaurants, bars, stores, and cafes that Leila described as very artsy and “hipster.” Leila

even notes how a friend's mother didn't want her daughter going to this area because there were, in the mother's words, "too many homos" in the neighborhood.

When prompted about the perceptions of being a woman in the Middle East, Leila had quite a lot to disclose that she had been pondering for some time:

"One issue I have about how people perceive womanhood in the Middle East in general is that people are always met with lies about women being oppressed and women being very submissive and very domestic, and always have this notion of, 'Arab women need to be saved from like, oppressive Arab men....' I realized that this savior complex exists so much here in the states, but I didn't realize how bad it was until I came here. There's this notion that Arab womanhood looks like oppression. I grew up with a lot of strong women, and by strong I don't mean like, independent or outspoken women because I grew up with women who do play the housewife roles...The men in their households are more dominant, but I say they're strong because I don't think that there's as much of an appreciation for what it takes, like the courage for a woman to devote her life to her kids and to her home like that and to kind of self-realize when she's living in that kind of community.

On the other hand, Leila notes she has "met many women who are very independent." A particularly profound moment for her was a moment of reflection wherein she states, "there are so many different ways you can be a woman and I think that every woman has the right to express her womanhood differently and like there



shouldn't be a stigma around working women or like like housewives or whatever. I just have an issue with the male and Western perception of Arab woman.” Throughout her interview, Leila continued to have these moments of discovery and reflection, which I found telling in itself. It felt as though she was blossoming simply because she was being asked these questions in a safe environment.

Leila’s commentary on the relationships between her two identities (queer and Arab) was fascinating. She believes her queer identity threatens her Arab identity and that this has always been the case. Further, she ponders a conversation she had with her history teacher regarding homophobia and how colonialism feeds into this form of oppression.

“My history teacher was telling me about homophobia and how that came with colonialism to North Africa and the Middle East. Of course, homophobia did come with certain patriarchal interpretations of Islam specifically, but a lot of it was from the West. She was telling me about all of these queer Bedouin tribes who just had this sexual fluidity and there wasn't really a label to it. There wasn't this whole coming out concept and it was considered normal. I was so shocked at that because I think the misconception is that here's this idea that there aren't any Arabs that are queer or that there shouldn't be or if there are queer Arabs, it's all westernization. So many times, these very egotistical, very arrogant Arab men have told me being gay isn't an Arab thing. There aren't any gay Arabs and that it's all drawn from the West. And I'm like, actually, why don't you look at these research papers and these studies and then rethink your argument because you just

have a lot of internalized homophobia. I realized how queerness has been through so much and evolved throughout history... it's just something that people have to accept.”

I asked Leila if she had come out to anyone in her family. She noted that she probably wouldn't come out to her parents, but that she had recently told both of her older sisters. She was most afraid of her eldest sister's reaction, for she is the most conservative and religious of the three of the siblings. Interestingly enough, her sister stated she knew “the minute she came back from the airport” that something was different, which prompted Leila to think about potential stereotypes she was presenting or that her sister had been picking out. Still, both of her sisters are incredibly supportive and accepting of Leila. She says that they've had many conversations and that she's even been able to tell them about recent dates she's had with another young woman. She does note that it feels different when she talks about her experiences versus when her sisters discuss the guys they're dating, but she still believes she is lucky to have some support from people in her immediate family. In contrast, though, she notes she would never tell her father. “I would never tell my dad, for sure. I think he would probably disown me and I'm not kidding when I say that.”

Leila says that while she is only openly queer to a few people at home in Jordan, the majority of her circles here in America know about her sexuality. She finds that she doesn't necessarily need to disclose it, but that it is easier to do so or simply make passing comments that indicate her sexuality without actually having to come out. Leila believes that migrating to the United States has made it more helpful for her to feel safe.

In fact, her biggest fear about migrating as a queer individual had little to do with external sources but rather the notion that she would have to come to terms with her identity. She that she “had to focus a lot on healing a lot of cultural and religious trauma in order to understand myself more here” but that the liberal, non-religious culture she surrounds herself with has been very helpful. She attributes most of her positive experiences to the environment and people at her university, a well-known and highly esteemed liberal school on the East Coast. For Leila, her fear and anxiety manifests when she has to return to Jordan, “to a community where you have to be very quiet about these things...there’s a lot of judgement judgement there that you have to face when you go back home and that was a fear that was instilled within me while I was here in the States.”

Regarding her religion, Leila was raised in a “very liberal” Muslim household where she and her sisters could wear whatever they wanted. Her parents provided a fairly comfortable environment for Leila and her sisters to share their beliefs about Islam, so much so that one of her sisters openly discussed her disbelief in the religion. She knows that this upsets her parents deeply, but appreciates that they still remain less strict than many of her friends’ parents. She recalls when she was a young child briefly living in Belgium and how her parents educated their children in multiple religions by celebrating different holidays. She then notes how Islam has been more of a cultural aspect rather than a religious one in her life.

“When I first moved, I had no idea I was Muslim because in Belgium, we were celebrating Christmas and Easter. We did celebrate Ramadan and Eid, but I

thought they were cultural. I didn't realize that religion was a big thing that identified you. Growing up my mom always read me the Quran before I went to sleep to calm me down, but I never thought of it as religion, like this is my religion and I believe in Allah and all of these things. It was more cultural."

Leila believes this cultural influence of Islam plays a stronger role than the religious aspect of it in Jordan. She discusses how a teacher in her school regularly said that gays should be burned and thrown out the window and that her classmates would be so uncomfortable but remain quiet because "it was the norm." Further, a young woman in her class went to hug one of her male friends and was met with criticism from her teacher, who said that she needed to think about her actions and that God didn't want women becoming "international." Leila saw this comment as derogatory and indicative of the beliefs of the nation as a whole. In her eyes, much of the culture is ableist, homophobic, and sexist, which has prompted her to not practice any religion

I asked Leila how she would like to see queer Arab women represented in the future. She immediately notes how Arab women are exoticized and sexualized and seen through a very Orientalist gaze. Leila says, "I would like to see Arab woman in general be more humanized. I think that humanization will allow for the acceptance of the queer side." She is tired of the objectification of queer Arab women and how this confuses a lot of these women, including herself. "I feel like when it comes to a lot of bisexual woman, people assume that you're not actually interested in women. You're just having fun, or you're just experimenting. I think that made me really doubt my sexuality for the longest time. I would always think like, oh, maybe I'm not gay." Perhaps the most frustrating

aspect for her, however, is that people are willing to accept gay Arab men but think that queer Arab women don't exist. "It's so bad because queer Arab women aren't only facing this other process because of their sexual identity, but because of their feminine identity because of the patriarchy. So you have different forms of oppression coming through and they're both very interrelated and they both have to be acknowledged." This continued to be a theme in my conversation with other to which I listened.

### **Noor**

Noor is a nineteen year old college student from Palestine. She identifies as a cisgender queer woman and uses she/her pronouns. At the time of this interview, she has lived in the United States for approximately two years. She says that she had an inkling something was "different" about her at approximately age thirteen or fourteen. Additionally, she notes that finding her cultural identity has been tricky due to growing up in an international school and thus not being as connected to her Arab background. However, she does attribute her openness to being queer to this disconnect from her culture.

"I think it let me be more accepting and be more okay with my queerness, which I think is really good because I got to be okay with that part of me and grow to love that part of me away from... people with certain Arab ideals and then grow to be more Arab and learn more about who I am as an Arab and a queer woman at the same time."

She remarks that queer visibility in Palestine is limited, particularly in the conservative and religious city of Jerusalem, but that Tel Aviv is “known to be a really good place to be gay.” That being said, Noor has not come out to anyone in her family besides her sister. She describes her relationship with her family as being distant due to their knowing her queer identity, “knowing that if I were to come out to them, it might completely change my relationship with them.” She is close with her friends both back in Palestine and here in the United States, though one of these people she no longer speaks to after they “outed” her to other people. She has since become very cautious of who she chooses to come out to but notes that everyone has been very supportive.

When asked about the difference in how queerness is seen in the United States versus back home, Noor brings up a relationship she had with a young woman in Palestine:

“I was involved with someone back home...I feel like it wasn't seen as serious simply because I was another girl as opposed to being this other guy...She didn't view it the same way.”

Further, Noor notes the fetishization of queer women overseas and how they are seen via the male gaze versus how she has seen them observed by men here in the United States. She feels it stems from anti-LGBTQ rhetoric:

“Another thing is no matter how accepting they are, they're still always that kind of negative perception of gay people and the LGBTQ community. I think especially this is a really weird one, but if you were to

come out to let's say your guy friends here or overseas. Back home, I think a lot of it would be like oversexualized and the only reason to accept it is because it's like 'Oh, girls, that's hot.' Well here, it is coming from a more genuine place rather than out of something that's like attraction to them. It's not always through the male gaze."

In terms of migration as a queer person, Noor noticed that she felt a certain sense of freedom. For example, she was able to be sad about dates that didn't go well and be upset in her room without having to hide it or explain this to anyone. At the same time, she felt and continues to experience guilt as she knows that her parents would disapprove of her exploring her sexuality. She has conflicting thoughts because she understands that while she isn't doing anything wrong, the effects of her freedom of expression could be dire.

One of the major differences in American queer culture is the discourse surrounding "coming out." She finds that coming out is much more relaxed but simultaneously can be a "big issue within their American families here and everything, but it feels like it's not taken as seriously and they don't have the same consequences and things like that." Further, she discusses her outlook on an anonymous posting on her university's "Confessions" social media page wherein a student posted that they felt as if they were suffocating due to hiding their sexuality. She noted how frustrated she was with the comments section where some of the responses seemed to be coming from a very white-centric, privileged space:

“‘Just be yourself first.’ Another one said ‘your parents will either love you and support you no matter who you are or they're not worth your time. How they deal with your sexuality is more on them than on you.’ Those comments... It was like, you are completely disregarding the fact that this person might be in a really bad situation where they can't come out. Yes, being closeted is negatively impacting your mental health. I can completely understand that. It sucks, but risking that and coming out to parents that are completely homophobic and might kick you out and you would have to completely be on your own at that point...it's more than about just being yourself.”

Rather than risk her relationship with her parents, Noor chooses to hide her sexuality from them. She notes, “My dad is one of the kindest, most generous people I've ever seen. But if I come out to him, it's gonna be a whole different story.” Further, she doesn't expect him to completely switch his views on homosexuality given that he grew up in a very different time and is set in his ways. She remarks that it is very different for BIPOC individuals to be queer than it is for white individuals and that people who say things like the aforementioned comments on the anonymous post simply don't understand that there are consequences and so much that can be on the line. In a somewhat fearful tone, she states, “Yes, I'll be fine. But like, that's not a guarantee that I'll still have my family at the end of it.” This fear of family reactions appears to be a common thread in the narratives of other queer Arab women as well.



## **Chapter 6: Emerging Themes of Femininity, Coming Out, and Visibility**

When I first began this research, I believed that scholarly research and mainstream LGBTQIA movements at large were both excluding an entire group of women. Research has been conducted on homosexual Arab males and their racialization, but it was very clear to me that Middle Eastern women had a completely different collection of experiences given that gender does separate individuals in the Arab culture. In researching, interviewing, collecting data, and writing this thesis, I now recognize that this project was not just shedding light on a marginalized community. Rather, this body of work emphasizes the complexities of Arab women's relationships with her homeland, her family, her culture, and the LGBTQIA communities on an international level. Accordingly, three themes began to emerge as I conducted this research.

### **Women and Patriarchy**

In the film *I Exist*, one of the featured participants notes:

“*Madha sayafeal alnaas*’ is one of these things that is always on our mind. It translates to ‘*what will people say?*’”

When I heard this sentiment, I was struck by how many different versions of this commentary I have heard in my interviews, in conversations with other Arabs, and in my own mind. The individuals whose stories I feature in this thesis all share an underlying

theme of living for others, particularly their families in their countries of origin. These women have deep, complex relationships with their families that are connected to family honor, tradition, and obligation as these are predominant themes in the lives of many Arab women, queer and straight alike. As such, an underlying commonality among the women I have spoken with is that living without family would constitute losing a valuable tie to their culture. These relationships are not as cut-and-dry as what appears to be a situation of conservative, religious families versus the liberal Westernized women. The ties that bind are much more complicated than such binaries suggest. For example, the same participant in *I Exist* states:

“Arab culture, in my experience, plays a lot on guilt. I think that comes from being a very collective type of society. I think that family really uses that and I think that guilt is so engrained in me in terms of not obeying your parents or culture.”

Familial duty seems to be a major theme amongst the material I have gathered throughout this project. Returning to Yasmeen’s story, she remarked how women are supposed to be the go-to support system in her homeland. Women are to be in servitude of not only their husband and families, but to the people around them as well. Most importantly, however, is the notion that all women must marry. As one participant in *I Exist* states, “You don’t become a woman until you marry.” The borderline grooming of young girls begins when they are born, according to another participant in *I Exist*:

“From when a little girl is born, they say ‘god willing, you’ll marry her soon enough.’ From before the baby can even crawl, you’re hoping she’s going to get married.”

I recall my own family telling me I would be a wonderful wife and mother to my children when I wasn’t even ten years old yet. I thought I was alone in this, but this norm proved to be a common trope in the Middle Eastern community’s treatment of young women according to the film and the responses of my participants. It seems that this norm has been constructed over the years simply to meet societal expectations, as mentioned at the beginning of this section. Indeed, what will the people say if a woman *doesn’t* marry? Is she sick? Is she “not right” (the community’s way of suggesting one has mental health issues) or broken in some way?

Perhaps that woman considers herself “broken” if she realizes she is queer. The internalized homophobia experienced by many queer BIPOC individuals is often based in the cultural and patriarchal standards of their respective homelands. In communities that are largely male-dominated, such as in many countries in the Middle Eastern world, some women who discover their queerness often feel dirty or wrong. This perpetuates internalized homophobia and misogyny, where women are not allowed to be queer because they have familial and societal duties. If their families were to find out, they may be shunned and exiled.

At the same time, the world is beginning to see Arab woman who dare to speak out and challenge the status quo. In September 2022, a young Iranian woman by the

name of Kina Mahsa Amini died at the hands of Iran's "morality police" for improperly wearing her hijab. In the following weeks, her death sparked one of the largest Iranian protest movements of the century. The streets of Tehran, the capital of Iran, have been flooded with thousands of protestors chanting "Death to the dictator" Arab women are driving what is the largest anti-government Iran has seen in decades and risking their lives to demand simple freedoms. Sharia law, the legal system of Islam, dictates how women can dress and behave, and how they can be punished for disobeying. Yet, Arab women are taking to the streets fully aware of the brutality of armed forces and protesting anyway. They are determined, resilient, and strong-willed. This representation of Arab women is vastly different from what the world has previously witnessed.

Before moving to the next section of themes, I wish to acknowledge that Western women do in fact contend with some similar experiences in terms of being oppressed. This is particularly evident in the recent overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States, wherein legal abortions have been banned in roughly half of the states in the country. This speaks to the decades-long, nay centuries-long, battle on policing women's bodies and rights. I highlight here that abortion bans typically have the most impact on vulnerable populations in low-income, predominantly BIPOC communities. While communities comprised of white women are indeed affected by shattering changes like the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, it is imperative to remember that BIPOC women have always experienced policing at a deeper level that systemically intertwines race with gender. Women everywhere are victims of policing, but women who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color continue to be oppressed due to their multiple

marginalized identities, a tenet of intersectionality Mousa (2011) states of Arab women and that I have previously referenced in this work.

The oppression of women, particularly Arab women, is often harsh enough simply for being a woman. When topics of identity, particularly sexuality, come about, the likelihood of dangerous circumstances vastly increases. In the next section, I explore how fear of oppression carries over into discourses on coming out as queer in the Arab world.

### **Conversations on Coming Out**

In order to contextualize the discourses from my ethnographic study surrounding coming out, I wish to highlight Manalansan's (1995) piece "In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and the Diasporic Dilemma." While this work focuses on gay Filipino men, Manalansan's cross-cultural analysis of the events of Stonewall examines the discourses of queer transnational politics and can be applied to queer Arab diasporic women. His work reviews scholarship on queer transnational identities and seeks to answer the question of who establishes and endorses the norms, ideals, and practices of queer culture. Further, Manalansan explores the strategies employed to "justify, establish, execute, or resist either the 'authentic' nativist search for primordial 'gay and lesbian' phenomena or the imposition of international egalitarianism." (pg. 428)

Manalansan notes that media and public opinion, "have long taken for granted that gay and lesbian culture and politics have spread worldwide." (pg. 427) Queer culture

has indeed expanded transnationally, bringing with it different norms and forms of engagement than are often seen or perceived to be the norm in the Western world. A problematic aspect of the Eurocentric world is that the words “gay” and “queer” already come with connotations that paint this culture as a monolithic entity. Among these expectations is the conversation surrounding “coming out.” As previously referenced in my interview with Noor, coming out is a fairly significant part of the queer identity, or is perceived to be such, for many people in Western world. This is not the case for all cultures, as Manalansan accordingly notes: “Homosexuality in the Philippines has long been seen as a ‘non-issue.’” (pg. 430)

One of my survey respondents noted, “I’m out to everyone here but disclosing my queerness was not a big event - a lot of people around me were queer and it was sort of assumed.” In a similar vein, one of Manalansan’s informants notes, “I know who I am and most people, including my family, know about me - without any declaration.” Further, Manalansan states queer Filipino men assert that these identities are not stated outright, but are assumed by those around them. (pg. 434) Both of these examples exemplify the border-line nonchalance of coming out amongst fellow queer people of color, especially those outside one’s family. At the same time, coming out to family can be complex when there are multiple generations in a household, as previously noted in the interviews I conducted. According to one of my survey respondents, “My friends were very accepting and so was my brother. My mother pretends like it didn’t happen.”

For several of Manalansan’s informants, being “in the closet” is not an integral part of their story due to the fact that, at the time of publication, visibility was dangerous

for queer Filipinos. Further, not all queer spaces were open to immigrants, and many to this day are still fairly white-centric and exclusionary of BIPOC populations.

Accordingly, one of Manalansan's interview subjects noted, "I may be a doctor and wear expensive clothes, but when I go to [a white, upper-class gay restaurant on the East Side of Manhattan] I feel left out, like I don't belong." (pg. 434) Another participant in Manalansan's study profoundly commented:

"We need yet to listen more carefully and more seriously to narratives of global and interconnected sexual and racial dominance and subordination, to narratives of our poor and unjustly inequitable national social reality, to narratives of the women in our society, whether they attempt to destroy or to affirm our 'humanity.' We need yet to speak our different desires, we need to speak our name." (pg. 484)

The topics of visibility and self-disclosure explored in Manalansan's piece are also described in Decena's (2008) work, particularly in his study of queer, male Latino voices who have migrated to New York City. While the group described in Decena's work clearly differs from queer, Arab women in geographic origins and gender, both Manalansan and Decena comment on the statements provided by their informants that are consistent with views expressed by other populations of color in the United States:

"...some queers of color have an uneasy relationship with the closet because they resist the depoliticized 'liberation' that coming out promises, which currently resides in a gay identity as a social-cultural formation and

as a niche market. Critiques of coming out in its current form have and continue to be made partly because of the persistence of this way of thinking about gay subject formation and the racial and class biases obscured by this dominant model.” (Decena, pg. 339)

Decena’s findings on self-disclosure to family members echoed the commentary in my interviews with the participants in my study:

“...parents and children agree not to talk about questions of sexuality in general and of homosexuality in particular. But what makes that agreement possible is the understanding that one’s sexuality is a private matter best kept away from scrutiny outside one’s immediate family networks.” (pg. 346)

Another study that mirrors the issues of this thesis focuses on migrant Mexican lesbians and their journeys to the borderlands. In her research, Acosta (2008) seeks to “address how the migration process shapes identity construction... lesbiana migrants develop a ‘mestiza consciousness’ from the multiple challenges associated with entering the borderlands...mestiza consciousness is a synthesis of Mexican women's negotiation of situated and plural identities.” (pg. 640) These women are “torn” both physically and metaphorically from their homelands and thrown into a social setting that can evoke both a reconstruction of self in order to survive their new surrounds and a strong sense of self-doubt. In fact, Acosta reports that half of the participants in her study had not come out to their families and maintained two separate worlds: “one that they share in the borderlands



with their partners and another that they nurture through transnational ties with their families of origin.” (pg. 647)

Decena’s words echo those of Acosta’s in that coming out is a carefully negotiated and lifelong process that is shaped by social constructs and life circumstances that surround an individual:

“In a neoliberal world that exalts the atomized and unmoored individual and in LGBTQ communities that celebrate self-making by clinging to the promise of coming out as the romance of individual liberation, tacit subjects may make us more aware that coming out is always partial, that the closet is a collaborative social formation, and that people negotiate it according to their specific social circumstances.” (pg. 355)

From all of these comments, sources, stories, and analyses emerged a theme of visibility, or lack thereof, wherein individuals longed to be recognized as their true selves while simultaneously experiencing feelings of fear and shame. This commonality began to arise in the stories I read, heard, and experienced as I will share in the following section.

### **Visibility and Representation**

Even with the aforementioned complications and complexities of coming out, visibility matters to this community. Representation is important to these people even when they are young, as shared by a participant in *I Exist*:

“I remember being about 15 and going to the library and looking up books on Arab culture or on Islam and I would always go to the index and look up homosexuality, and I never, ever found anything.”

While the film was well-intentioned and provided a wealth of information, here I wish to share a brief critique of *I Exist*. The film was produced by Arab Film Distribution, a Seattle-based film company that specifically distributes its films throughout North America. Little information is available regarding the documentary’s directors Peter Barbosa and Garrett Lenoir, aside from the fact that they produced a similar film regarding queer Latina individuals. This leads me to believe that they specialize in sharing the stories of queer BIPOC individuals. However, these presumably Western filmmakers are creating these pieces of media specifically for Western audiences. When documentaries are filmed for Western audiences, filmmakers often fall into the trap of presenting stereotypes of the culture they are researching and sharing. In particular, the Middle East has often been a target of this misrepresentation on the Hollywood big screen. As Shohat (1990) states,

“From its very beginning, Western cinema has been fascinated with the mystique of the Orient. Whether in the form of pseudo-Egyptian movie palaces, Biblical spectacles, or the fondness for ‘Oriental’ settings, Western cinema has returned time and again to the scene of the Orient.”  
(pg. 40)

Oftentimes, the Western filmmakers behind these films are seen as “saviors” when these nations do not need saving. Practices that are norms in these cultures overseas are harshly judged through a Western lens, with media often painting the customs of these cultures as barbaric and/or cruel. These films often lack the essence of the culture they are representing, which results in the misunderstanding and even problematizing of the culture at hand. As Feigenbaum (2011) states,

“It is reasonable to assume that as the distance between the consumers and producers of movies and television shows increases, the cultural references become less familiar, more ambiguous, and consequently more open to local interpretation... Thus, one needs to be cautious in judging the impact of American cultural export.” (pg. 112)

A relevant point Shohat (1990) shares is that there is a significant presence of gender and sexuality in discourses surrounding colonialism. The male gaze is particularly noticeable in media and material that focuses on Western consumption of “Other” women:

“Veiled women in Orientalist films, paintings and photographs ironically expose more flesh than they conceal. This process of exposing the female Other, of denuding her literally, comes to allegorize the power of Western man to possess her. She, as a metaphor for her land, becomes available for Western penetration and domination.” (pg. 40)

The masculine narrative of women needing to be saved has been perpetuated time and time again in major blockbuster films. One of the most notable examples is that of *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark*, in which, as Shohat states, “Western ‘knowledge’ of ancient civilizations ‘rescues’ the past from oblivion.” (pg. 41) This white savior complex is a common trope in Western representations of non-Western countries, where cultures of the “Orient” need Western advancements in order to be brought up to speed in the world. Further, this white savior complex extends to the male gaze wherein, “Western women characters became the delegates of the white male perspective in these films, being granted a more powerful gaze in relation not only to non-white women but also to non-white men.” (Shohat, pg. 41) White women characters are desired by both protagonists and antagonists while darker women “appear largely as sexually hungry subalterns” and illustrate that women of color are a means for Western audiences to play out their fantasies of sexual domination. (pg. 41)

Where *I Exist* can be seen as falling into the aforementioned trap of perpetuating stereotypes is in the editing of the participants’ responses. Some of the respondents ask for the camera to be turned off at emotional points when they need a break, which doesn’t appear to actually happen as the camera continues recording several seconds beyond the request. While the participants are not explicitly coached on camera to answer in any specific way, I felt as though the participants were being swayed to answer questions and share their stories in very emotionally-driven and almost dramatic ways. This is not to say that their stories themselves were not credible, for I’m sure these are traumas and experiences they have truly gone through. It simply seemed as though the cut-away

points were meant to be cliffhangers for the audience and that each participant's emotional moments were trivialized.

Despite the above critiques, however, *I Exist* can be seen as a valuable piece of media for those who wish to learn about queer Arab culture as long as they recognize the vantage point through which the film was produced. This is especially so for queer Arabs who are younger and may not be exposed to educational material about their community. As referenced by one of the film's participants, it was not until they reached the Western world that they were even aware of differing sexualities:

“I really became attracted to my own kind before I was even educated about sexuality...The difference between Iran and here is that I wasn't aware of it. I wasn't aware that this could be socially acceptable because nobody ever talked about it. So just not talking about it does not mean that we do not exist.”

Returning to Acosta's (2008) piece surrounding lesbianas, she notes that while researchers have made strides in analyzing the gendered aspects of migrant experiences, the narratives of Latina lesbians are vastly underrepresented in social science scholarship. (pg. 642) She describes how these women create safe spaces for themselves to accommodate the inequalities within their new land:

“By distancing themselves from their families of origin, lesbianas construct a borderland space to express their sexuality. Outside of this borderland space, these migrants hide their lesbian existence out of fear

that their families will discover this unacceptable part of the Self.” (pg. 640)

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

This work has sought to explore the intricacies and complexities of existing as a queer, diasporic Arab woman living in the United States by analyzing interviews and survey data produced via this ethnography with literature on queer diaspora, Arab culture, and feminism. While the data collected in this thesis was plentiful with personal anecdotes and narratives with clear overlapping ties, I recognize that the limitations of this work are notable in that I was able to interview only three participants. As I previously mentioned, most of the participants originally scheduled to take part in the

interview process decided to cancel due to fear of being outed their communities. The three women interviewed here do not speak for all of this particular population and their stories barely scratch the surface of a study that has the potential to offer a riveting and more in-depth analysis of the intersection of queerness, womanhood, and culture. I believe that future researchers, including myself, would be able to gain more information should more time be allotted for gathering data. I am also of the opinion that it would be beneficial to travel to Arab spaces across the United States to speak with women and learn about queer environments near these establishments.

The visibility of this population is narrow, but has the potential to grow in presence. As one participant in *I Exist* declares, queer Arab women do indeed exist:

“When I first came out, being queer and being Arab could not happen. For me, they were like oil and water...I’ve gotten to a point now where if you ask me to choose between being queer and being Arab, I could not. For me they have to occur together and I get asked which identity is more important for me. They are one identity, they cannot exist outside of each other and I think my of being queer is influenced by my way of being Arab and my way of being Arab is influenced by my queer identity so they have to exist together. Otherwise I don’t exist, and I know I do.”

In line with the passionate words this participant states, it is far past due for queer Arab women in diaspora to be represented accurately and respectfully in all forms of media and literature. The identities of queer BIPOC individuals, specifically LGBTQ+ Arab women, indicate that intersectionality is a key component of understanding

underrepresented marginalized communities. By this I mean to say that one must keep in mind each and every identity a person is comprised of (i.e. queer, BIPOC, woman, etc.) in order to fully comprehend and appreciate that individual's struggles and triumphs. Decena and his participants would agree with this belief. As one of his participants comments:

“One of the things that I have to be clear about is that I was born in a place, in a country that is located in a certain part of the globe. And depending on what part of the globe that country is located in, I was born with advantages and disadvantages. So I have to play with my advantages and disadvantages, at a global level, at a national level, at a social level, at a family level. You have to decide if you want to play to win or to lose.”  
(pg. 352)

It is my hope that in time, queer Arab women will continue to find each other via social media in order to build transnational queer networks and continue pushing for representation. We owe it to each other, and to ourselves, to continue growing and nurturing a very special community with rich cultural meaning and a bright future ahead.



## Appendix A – Interview/Survey Questions

1. What pronouns do you use?
2. How would you describe your gender identity?
3. How would you describe your sexual orientation?
4. How old are you?
5. Are you currently partnered? If not currently, what relationships have you previously been in?
6. What country were you born in?
7. What other countries have you lived in?
8. How long have you lived in the United States?
9. Did you move to a different country before coming to the United States?
10. What prompted you to move from your home country? What prompted you to move to the US specifically?
11. What does queer representation look like in your home country?
12. What does womanhood look like in your home country?
13. How old were you when you realized you were queer?
14. What is the relationship between your identity as a queer woman and your Arab identity?
15. Does your family know you are queer?
16. Who knows you are queer? Who doesn't know you are queer?
17. What is your relationship with your family like?
18. If you are "out" to anyone in your home country, how did you go about disclosing your queerness?
19. If you are "out" to anyone in the United States, how did you go about disclosing your queerness? What does your support network look like?
20. Have you found any differences in how queerness is displayed and received in the US vs. the Arab world?
21. Are you in contact with any other queer Arab women?
22. How have you found other queer Arab women? Are there social networks for queer Arabs that aren't particularly visible?
23. What was your experience migrating overseas as a queer individual?
24. Given your experiences, is there anything you would have done differently? What do you wish you had known beforehand?

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## **Biography**

Lexi Haddad received her Bachelor of Arts in Integrative Studies in Arts & Culture from George Mason University in 2014. She currently resides in the Washington DC metro area.