

IMPOSSIBLE FIGURES

Reorienting Depictions of Gay Palestinians

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In December 2016, a panel discussion of the film *Oriented* (2016), a documentary by British director Jake Witzenfeld that depicts the lives of three gay Palestinian men living in Tel Aviv, took place at Birbeck, University of London as part of a Palestinian Arts Festival. I learned of this panel through an account of the discussion posted on Facebook by author and panel participant Saleem Haddad (2016), who was dismayed by the “vitriolic” nature of the panel. Haddad acknowledged his own misgivings about the film, which in his view did not adequately contextualize the experiences depicted in the film in relation to the occupation of Palestine and the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Yet he also found moments of beauty in the film, and was able to learn about a community of queer Arabs whom he rarely encounters. For this reason, he was troubled by the panel’s dismissal of the experiences of the men in the film as unrepresentative of Palestinian queer lives, and he took particular issue with one panelist’s characterization of the film as “disgusting.” For Haddad, the tendency to dismiss narratives and experiences that are not “representative” of the community in the name of a particular political message is dangerous and fails to make room for the “diversity” and “beautiful mosaic” of queer Arab and Palestinian experiences. “Nuance was murdered,” he wrote. He argues that one should be able to critique the film for pinkwashing while also acknowledging the insight it provides into particular experiences of Palestinian gay men in Tel Aviv and Jaffa.¹ In other words, he suggests, individual experiences should not be erased if they do not buttress a particular political message.

This article will consider depictions of gay Palestinians in *Oriented* and two other documentary films—*City of Borders* (2009), directed by Yun Suh, which revolves around Jerusalem’s only gay bar; and *The Invisible Men* (2012), by Israeli director Yariv Mozer, which follows Palestinian asylum seekers in Tel Aviv. I begin with this panel discussion, an emotionally charged but fleeting moment of dis-

course surrounding a documentary about three Palestinian gay men, because it raises questions of representation that I address here: specifically, concerns about how and by whom gay Palestinian lives should be represented and the extent to which these representations are determined by particular political ideologies. It seems that gay—and more broadly, queer—Palestinians are frequently burdened with representing the nation and politics in a politically palatable (and often overdetermined) manner. Moreover, these questions occur within the inescapable context of settler colonialism, in which the question of gay rights has been wielded as a weapon through pinkwashing, by which the state of Israel has used its record on gay rights to portray and market itself as a beachhead of progressive liberalism in the region (Puar 2017: 96). In a cultural moment in which attitudes toward homosexuality have emerged as a litmus test for modernity (Savcı 2016a: 163), pinkwashing deploys a “civilizational narrative about the modernity of the Israelis juxtaposed against the backward homophobia of the Palestinians” (Puar 2017: 96). Israel, writes Jasbir Puar (2007: 38), is a pioneer of homonationalism, which she has defined as a process by which certain gay and queer bodies are incorporated into the nation (and nationalist forms of exceptionalism and imperialism), to the exclusion of racialized others, in particular Muslims and Arabs.

The panel discussion described above demonstrates the tension that emerges when legitimate concerns about pinkwashing overpower or drown out particular experiences that do not fit comfortably within preexisting narratives, which has the unfortunate effect of silencing or trivializing the experiences of people such as the gay subjects of *Oriented*, who are also victims in different ways of Israeli discrimination and occupation. The impetus behind this article, then, is to consider how narratives can be understood in a manner that accounts for the occupation and pinkwashing without erasing the lived experiences of gay and queer Palestinians who must negotiate these conditions on a daily basis. This question must be considered in the context of a larger tension within the study of sexuality in the Middle East, in which both homonationalist rhetoric and certain critiques of Orientalism and neo-imperialism produce this erasure in different ways. If the former renders queer Palestinians legible through victimhood and justification of occupation and violence against brown bodies (Puar 2017: 96), the latter renders queer Palestinians legible only insofar as they affirm and validate critiques of Western sexual identity categories. On one hand, critiques that show how “homosexual” and other categories of sexual orientation emerge from within a Western imperial context, such as that articulated by Joseph Massad (2007), are an important corrective to tendencies to naturalize and universalize categories of sexual identity. On the other hand, such critiques can fail to make space for the experi-

ences of Middle Easterners who have found value in claiming and using, but also repurposing and in many instances reimagining, the meanings of these categories to conceptualize their own identities, sexual and otherwise.² By focusing on the question of where agency, particularity, and lived experience—or “nuance,” to use Haddad’s term—fit into critiques of Orientalism, neo-imperialism, pink-washing, and homonationalism, I hope to move beyond dichotomies of Western and authentically local, which tend to produce an untenably homogenous understanding of queer activism as well as a silencing effect on narratives that do not fit either context.

In this article, I aim to contribute to this effort by considering how an engagement with how the films’ characters experience and inhabit space might help us acknowledge and disentangle this conundrum. The hope is to read these films beyond the extent to which they espouse acceptable (or unacceptable) political stances and to escape what Evren Savcı (2016b: 383) aptly characterizes as “a tale of normativities surrounding proper ways of being political, and of what counts as the proper language of queer politics.” I begin by considering how the films’ framings reproduce tropes of victimhood and inauthenticity through dichotomies of darkness/light and closeted/out that imagine the categories of Palestinian and gay as mutually exclusive. I then consider not only how aspects of these films reinforce homonationalist understandings of sexuality in the Middle East but also how some anti-imperialist scholarly critiques of such discourses fall short of providing the rhetorical and analytic tools needed to escape such dichotomies. I then turn to the notion of queer phenomenology, which follows an explicitly intersectional approach, to analyze the ways in which characters inhabit and experience certain spaces in the films. Specifically, I argue that attention to queerness as a spatial experience, which in the films manifests through depictions of the characters’ ways of being in and moving through urban spaces in Israel and Palestine, allows us to consider the experiences of the films’ characters outside the narrative of impossibility through which gay Palestinian lives are often understood and analyzed. By considering how these films portray and produce their gay subjects and their spaces, I read these films in many instances against the grain of their narrative framing. I show how certain moments both provide valuable insights into queer lives in Israel and Palestine and contest narratives of queer Palestinian victimhood and impossibility, despite filmmakers’ failure to interrogate certain dichotomies and their lack of political and cultural contextualization.

It should be noted that all three films focus most or all of their attention on the experiences of gay men. While there are a number of films that address the experiences of other segments of the Palestinian queer community,³ my focus

on gay men reflects my interest in how homonationalist rhetoric—which codes Muslim and Arab masculinities as both violent and failed (Puar 2007: xxiii)—manifests itself in a cohesive if limited corpus of documentary films. Given this focus on gay male identity, I largely use the term *gay* in my discussion of the films. However, much of the theoretical literature I draw on uses the word *queer* to refer to a broader, more inclusive set of nonnormative sexual identities and practices, of which male homosexuality is a specific subset, so I largely limit my use of the term *queer* to my conceptual discussion, in addition to using *queer* as a verb, in the sense articulated in Sarah Ahmed's (2006) work on experientiality and queerness.

While the three films all depict gay Palestinians and have circulated, to various degrees, primarily online and at film festivals, the distinctions among them reflect shifts over time in debates about sexuality in Palestine as well as differences in the production, funding, and circulation of such narratives. The earliest film, Suh's *City of Borders* (2009), revolves around a gay bar in Jerusalem—the Shushan—and the Palestinian and Israeli regulars who frequent it, including several Palestinians who sneak into Jerusalem from the West Bank to visit the club. The film imagines the Shushan, which faced economic and political pressure throughout its existence and shut down while the film was being made, as a kind of utopian space in which nonnormative sexualities bridge the ethnic, political, and religious tensions that characterize life in the city and region. While I was able to find little information on the film's funding and production, Suh contextualizes her film as a means of searching for hope within a context of long-term conflict. She states in an interview (Curiel 2009) that while in Israel and Palestine she saw many parallels to the conflict in her native Korea, and she decided to explore a particular space that she felt offered an escape from the logic of conflict. The film thus fits within a tradition of filmmakers who try to use their outsider perspective to view a long-standing situation in a new light.

The second film, Mozer's *Invisible Men* (2012), tells the story of three Palestinian men who live illegally in Tel Aviv while seeking asylum abroad. Mozer is a gay Israeli man who received support from Greenhouse Film Centre, a European Union- and Israeli-funded organization to support documentary filmmaking in the Middle East that might serve as a “catalyst for creating more open and just societies” (Greenhouse n.d.). While Greenhouse has many regional collaborators (though no Palestinian organization is among them), Yael Friedman's (2015: 21–22) study of the organization's goals and structure suggests that it does not produce equal partnerships but rather reinforces Eurocentric and Israeli patronage models and power dynamics. Indeed, the approach used by Greenhouse finds many paral-

lels in the narrative arc of *Invisible Men*, in which Europeans and Israelis act as patrons and saviors to Palestinians.

The most recent film, *Oriented*, appears to be the most widely distributed of the three, having been screened at LGBT film festivals, Pride celebrations, Israeli film festivals, and Arab or Palestinian film festivals in various countries (“Find a Screening” 2016). This film encapsulates many of the issues at play in the debates referenced above, as seen in the title’s connection both to sexual orientation and to the “Orient.” Born of a collaboration between Witzenfeld, a straight Jewish Briton living in Tel Aviv, and Khader Abu-Seif, one of the documentary’s subjects, *Oriented* was conceived as corrective to earlier films, such as *Invisible Men*, that highlight Palestinian victimhood (Olbrich 2016). It was largely self-funded by Witzenfeld and an Italian co-investor (Kamin 2015), which perhaps left more leeway to articulate distinct messages than would be the case with Greenhouse-funded films.

The differences in production, reception, and political message among the three films reflect two countervailing trends in the activist and academic landscape of debates around sexuality and Palestine between the release of Suh’s film in 2009 and Witzenfeld’s film in 2014. First, the past decade has witnessed dramatic growth in Palestinian activism around gender and sexuality and a shift toward more intersectional interventions, with important political implications. For instance, the most prominent Palestinian grassroots queer organization, alQaws, while established in 2001, made a conscious decision to move away from a single-issue politics of gayness and instead began arguing for queer activism as a crucial part of the anticolonial Palestinian struggle and vice versa (Alqaisiya 2018: 30–31). This shift has included support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement as well as a move away from cooperation and participation in Israeli LGBT activities in order to oppose Israeli colonialism (34). Second, a growing global interest in LGBT narratives converged with Israeli efforts to brand Israel as democratic and progressive on gay rights as well as with Palestinian activist efforts to counter attempts at pinkwashing (32, 35), to garner more attention, both positive and negative, toward such films. This shift likely partially accounts for the greater attention and critique received by the later films.

These are just a few of the films that depict gay Palestinians; others include Eytan Fox’s *The Bubble* (2006) and Michael Mayer’s *Out in the Dark* (2012), both of which depict love affairs between Israeli Jewish and Palestinian men that become entangled in Israeli-Palestinian violence. While many of the thematic concerns raised above appear in these feature films as well, I have chosen to focus in this essay on documentary because of my interest in individual Palestinian experi-

ences of gayness, which are more explicitly present in documentaries. Finally, I must acknowledge that I, like Haddad and the other panelists, find these films problematic in some ways. They highlight very real dangers and harm faced by those living in states that fail to protect, and sometimes target, queer individuals and society—all too common in the Arab world—but I worry that they rely upon a simplified taxonomy of “friendly” and “hostile” cultures and nation-states that erases both persistent strains of hostility in ostensibly gay-friendly states and the diverse range of experiences possible in those states that are often considered unfriendly. I am also concerned that these films feed the narrative of Israel as a gay refuge in a sea of Arab homophobia, which permits Israel to use its stance on gay rights—which, within the cohort of Western democracies to which Israel prefers to compare itself, is decidedly unremarkable⁴—to distract from its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and to market itself as a progressive, tolerant nation. Despite this hesitation, I hope to draw on certain elements of these films to gain insight into the complexity of gay Palestinian lives, whether in Palestine, Israel, or abroad, and to think critically about the conceptual frameworks for understanding these realities.

The Impossibility of Being a Gay Palestinian

Here I begin with some of the more problematic elements of the films and their framing, not simply because these must be acknowledged but because they also demonstrate not only the inadequacy of Western-centric, homonationalist, and Orientalizing approaches to understanding non-Western queer subjectivities, which I hope is obvious by now, but also the limits of critiques of Western sexual “universalism,” which can sometimes reproduce the very dichotomies of East-West and authentic-imposed that they seek to dismantle. A number of scholars whom I cite below have staged various forms of this critique, so my aim is less to rehash this debate⁵ than to consider the problem of reducing Arab gay identities themselves to a Western-imposed construct, which might lead to the wholesale rejection of narratives about gay Palestinians as inauthentic, insufficiently politically pure, or even, in the case of one member of the panel on *Oriented*, “disgusting.”

These types of films often operate within a framework of diametric oppositions and impossible choices. Mozer’s *Invisible Men* offers a good case study. It opens with an intertitle that establishes one of the central assumptions of the film: the impossibility of being a gay Palestinian in Israel/Palestine. It states, in part: “Every week, dozens of gay Palestinians manage to escape to Israel where they return to the closet, not as homosexuals, but as Palestinians.” The closet is a meta-

phor for the emergence of queer selfhood, of coming into being as a gay subject. To remain closeted, then, is to remain incomplete, thus the framing of gay Palestinians as caught between two closets depicts them as unable to exist as full gay subjects with agency. This intertitle is followed by the film's opening shots, which visually establish a dynamic of darkness and inhospitableness as they depict one of the film's Palestinian subjects, Louie, trying to sneak unseen past a group of Israeli soldiers at a West Bank checkpoint. He is concealed, unidentifiable, hidden from the soldiers—and to a great extent from the viewers—by the cover of night; in these beginning shots viewers see only occasional, partial glimpses of his face. The film repeatedly depicts its Palestinian protagonists moving through various spaces in the dark, which emphasizes the extent to which they remain invisible. Shots alternate between those of the landscape with soldiers manning a checkpoint and those produced by a handheld camera that jolts and shakes as Louie runs. The perspective shared with Louie helps viewers identify with him but without seeing him, keeping him “in the closet.” The viewers hear his voice as he calls someone, who we soon learn is Mozer, the film's director, who drives to the border to pick up Louie and take him back to Tel Aviv after Israeli police have deported him back to the West Bank. Only once the Israeli director has shown up to rescue Louie do viewers see Louie's face, suggesting that revealing himself requires the presence of the sympathetic Israeli, as seen in figure 1. Mozer's rescue of Louie from the triple vise of the Israeli authorities, the Palestinian authorities, and his Palestinian family creates a victim-savior narrative, casting Louie as a helpless figure in need of salvation.

Now contrast this first sequence with the film's closing scene, which features Louie and another of the film's Palestinian subjects, Abud, who by the end of the film have both received asylum in an unspecified European country. The rocky landscape and militarized borders of the Israel–West Bank frontier with which the film begins stand in stark contrast to the bucolic mountain village in which the pair end up. The establishing shots of the town depict people serenely going about their business as a layer of snow blankets the streets. These shots contrast with the film's frequent depiction of Tel Aviv streets as empty, emphasizing the extent to which the men's experience of life was profoundly solitary in this massive city, where any contact with a stranger was a potential source of danger. One shot in this sequence peers into the Palestinian pair's new home from the street; they have their drapes open, in broad daylight, opening up their house to the gaze of the outside world. Visually, this suggests that they have escaped the various closets to which they had been confined in Israel and Palestine, embracing a visibility that was denied to them. Moreover, at the end of the film, viewers are informed that the



Figure 1. The viewer receives the first clear shot of Louie as he is picked up at the West Bank checkpoint in Yariv Mozer's *The Invisible Men* (2013).

men's faces and names were only revealed because they were able to leave Israel/Palestine and find safety elsewhere. They have come out.

While this trajectory from closeted to out, from darkness to daylight, and from Israel/Palestine to abroad is most explicit in *Invisible Men*, the other two films also contain elements of the same narrative. The primary Palestinian character in *City of Borders*, a gay man from Ramallah named Boody, also sneaks across the wall between the West Bank and Jerusalem under the cover of darkness to spend time in the Shushan, and he eventually leaves Palestine for the United States. Even *Oriented*, which complicates this teleology by centering around a group of politically active Palestinian citizens of Israel, returns to many of the same tropes. Two of the film's subjects, a Palestinian and a Jewish Israeli who are partnered, seek to escape the difficulties of negotiating a cross-ethnic relationship by moving to Berlin. One of the film's main subjects, Khader Abu-Seif, states in an interview that his goal in both his activism and his participation in the documentary is "to show the world that we exist" (Isaacs 2015). The film is thus heavily invested in notions of visibility and escape.

While visibility can be an effective tactic for activists struggling for recognition and equal rights, Jason Ritchie (2010: 562) notes that many Western and Israeli gay activists define *visibility* in fairly narrow terms as coming out and proclaiming their identity. This visibility, moreover, is often used not to subvert power structures but rather to ask for protection from the "benevolent state" (562). Such

visibility is not always empowering but rather can perpetuate notions of queers of color as victims of their own ostensibly “backwards” societies and governments (Puar 2017: 99), which frequently deprives them of agency. Ritchie attributes this tendency to a refusal to attend to racial, ethnic, and class biases that inform the way in which much activism is framed (Ritchie 2010: 562). This is especially the case when it comes to Israeli advocacy for gay and queer Palestinians, which paints Palestinians as victims of their own society’s homophobia, to be rescued by well-meaning Israelis.

In the context of Israeli colonialism and occupation, moreover, visibility can be dangerous to Palestinian bodies. C. Heike Schotten (2018: 23) writes that queer Palestinians “are either completely invisible—that is, they do not exist at all—or they are hypervisible, but only in and as pawns of the Zionist project, within a limited range of spurious and racist archetypes,” such as victims of Palestinian homophobia, infiltrators, and terrorists. Checkpoints and walls, in particular, as Gil Z. Hochberg (2015: 17) suggests, are sites that produce Palestinian vulnerability through hypervisibility while also rendering them invisible in everyday Israeli life. In this light, the checkpoint scene at the beginning of *Invisible Men*, which stages the common trope of the Palestinian crossing the checkpoint into “the space of Israeli gayness” and enacts the narrative of rescuing Palestinians from their homophobic culture (Ritchie 2010: 563) unintentionally reveals the failure of visibility politics in the Palestinian context. Louie, a Palestinian gay man, becomes visible through a disciplinary space that renders him simultaneously victim and threat.

All three films exhibit skepticism toward the Israeli state’s treatment of gay Palestinians, even if this skepticism does not extend to a more systemic critique of Zionist practice and ideology. At best, the films view the state as coldly indifferent to the plight of the Palestinian men, as evidenced by its refusal to give them residency or asylum. At worst, state actors exploit Palestinian gay men’s fear of social retribution to force them to collaborate and spy for Israel, which then reinforces the notion of homosexuality not simply as a form of social deviation but as a threat to the security of the Palestinian nation. In this way, Israel becomes not a safe haven but at best a stopping point on the way to somewhere more welcoming. In *Invisible Men*, Israeli individuals, usually but not exclusively gay, function as savior figures by fighting an indifferent and hostile government on behalf of helpless Palestinians. Both Palestine and Israel function, to varying degrees, as unwelcoming spaces of hostility and fear. These men cannot be gay in Palestine and cannot be Palestinian in Israel, producing the gay Palestinian as a figure who is fundamentally out of place. However, this formulation also equates Palestinian

treatment of gay men to Israel's treatment of Palestinians, thereby erasing the vast power differential between the Israeli state and the Palestinian authorities. In this sense, the mutual impossibility of being gay and Palestinian, which is produced by the framing of Palestinian gay narratives through binaries of light/dark, visible/invisible, and out/closeted, both ignores power disparities and acts in service of broader homonationalist rhetoric and tendencies.

Puar, in her 2007 monograph *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, traces both how liberal (white) queerness frequently operates in a series of binaries, much like those I have identified in the films,⁶ and how the increasing governmental and social incorporation of certain homosexual bodies into nationalist discourses excludes other deviant bodies, namely terrorists, Muslims, and people of color. (White) queerness is reformulated as a part of, rather than excluded from, the nation and then used as a weapon to produce alien others and to produce an “exceptionalism [that] is increasingly marked through or aided by certain homosexual bodies” (4). Queers, no longer a threat to the nation's moral and cultural fabric, now become bodies in need of saving or protecting from the Muslim or Arab other,⁷ whose actual or potential victimhood justifies the war on terror, the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, and other imperial acts—or, more recently in the United States, restrictions on Muslim immigration.⁸ In this way, ostensibly progressive records on LGBT rights are weaponized by states such as Israel and the United States to justify the deployment of state violence. For Puar, homonationalism both relies upon and reinforces the notion of a diametric opposition between Muslim and queer, a notion that has clearly become deeply imbedded within a liberal queer imaginary that sees all religion, but especially Islam, as incompatible with queer subjectivity (13).⁹ Savcı (2016a: 164) also makes this point in her critique of secular queer theory's tendency to produce victim narratives and to render religious, and in particular Muslim queers, illegible. In this reading, Muslim queers must disavow their religiosity in order to become a “proper” queer subject, and those who retain their religious beliefs are seen as suffering from a pathological, repressed, or “improper sexuality” that is indicative of a diseased society that produces terrorism and violence (Puar 2007: 14).

While Puar's theorization of homonationalism focuses more generally on the production of Muslims and to a lesser extent Arabs as deviant others, I am specifically interested in how such depictions function in the Palestinian case, and a brief note on terminology is needed. While not all Palestinians are Muslim, and the term *Arab* is often used in place of Palestinian in order to downplay or erase Palestinian claims for national determination, Israel is one of the primary practitioners of homonationalism, and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians has been

central to the concept's theorization. Thus while I use the term *Palestinian* whenever I refer to the subjects of the films, I draw on relevant conceptual literature on the othering of Arabs and Muslims more generally. This is relevant when speaking specifically about representations of Palestinians, in which the production of Muslims and Arabs as illegible and pathological sexual figures permits the exercise of power over Palestinians in the context of Israeli colonialism. As Nadine Naber (Naber et al. 2018: 63) notes, "Israeli settler colonialism requires Palestinian sexuality to be non-normative—savage, repressed, deviant—to legitimize concepts of Palestinian barbarism / Israeli civility, and to justify Israeli domination over Palestinian land." The coding of Palestinian sexuality in this manner reflects a more general neo-Orientalist and homonationalist narrative in which categories of Western, secular, and proud are conflated and intertwined and are necessary for accessing an idealized form of queer subjectivity.

Critiques of such stereotypes and the epistemic and physical violence that they permit and justify have sought to push back against these depictions and to trace their colonial origins. Massad, in his seminal and influential *Desiring Arabs* (2007), argues that the category of homosexuality in the Middle East arrived as a Western import, and he attempts to challenge the homo-hetero binary that this Western cultural framework produces as a violent imposition on cultures that do not adhere to these categories. This an important argument—indeed, as Foucault ([1978] 1990: 101) and many others have shown, sexuality as an identity category in the West is itself a relatively recent product of modernity, though with the crucial difference that it was not imposed by an outside colonial power—and Massad (2007: 48) delves into an extensive intellectual, historical, and literary archive to support it. Like Puar, Massad is concerned about the imposition of a particular queer, Western subjectivity in a way that reproduces and perpetuates Western power.

In Massad's reading, there are certain forms of Arab sexual practice that have been and remain under threat by Western cultural and political forces. The title of one chapter, "Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World," reflects Massad's claim (164) that international LGBT organizations are trying to reorient Arab sexual practices to match those of the "enlightened" West. Yet this also assumes that there is a stable, preexisting, and accessible form of sexual practice that can be reoriented. As Tarek El-Ariss (2013: 118) argues, Massad fails to acknowledge that such sociocultural practices exist in a constant state of flux and reconfiguration: "Reclaiming Arab-Islamic tradition as a site of resistance to Western hegemony depicts an impossible return to something that is always already imagined, reconstituted, or reconstructed." Not only is such an imagined

past inaccessible from the present, it never existed in the first place. Raji Bathish (2014) notes Massad's assumption of a "straight line" (*khaṭṭ mustaqīm*) from the Abbasid period to the present, until its disruption by the advent of colonialism, neoliberalism, and globalization. Bathish's critique of Massad illuminates the way in which a framework that relies on fixed tradition and authenticity also makes little space for individual and collective experiences that do not conform to either "traditional" Arab sexual practices or the Western norms now being imposed,¹⁰ a point echoed by Ritchie (2010: 568), who notes the resilience of local sexual practices that complicate this narrative.

As long as the debate over sexuality in the Arab world remains within the parameters of forms of authenticity, straightness, or correct trajectories, it will continue to discursively produce gay and queer Arabs—and in particular Palestinians—as impossible figures, always displaced, deviant, and un-"straight," stuck between two incompatible worlds. Paul Amar (2011: 52) poses the challenge for anti-imperial critiques as one of mounting a critique of Eurocentrism "without adopting the stance of dependentistas who see sexuality and liberalization as dupes of imperial power" and, I would add, makes room for contemporary subjectivities that fit neither a Euro-American model of "proper" queerness nor a sexual practice that conforms to an already imagined and reconstructed Arab tradition.

It is notable that many of the terms of this debate—*East* and *West*, *straight* lines, *orientation*, *Orient*, and *reorienting*—are spatial and relational. Indeed, much of the scholarship that has sought to go beyond the terms of the debate described above engages implicitly or explicitly with how queer bodies inhabit spaces. El-Ariss (2013: 123), in his work on madness and homosexuality in Arabic literature, which contests the narrative of authentic sexual practice, argues that queer sexuality is framed through bodily experiences, through "movement, shaking up, and breaking down," all of which engage the question of how bodies exist and move within urban spaces like Cairo or between the Middle East and Europe. Sofian Merabet's (2014: 29) ethnographic work *Queer Beirut* is organized around different spaces of significance to queer life in Beirut and paints a picture of a vibrant and complex amalgam of nonheterosexual experiences and identities that reuse and appropriate various public and private spaces. Given Israel's "saturation of space and life with increasingly baroque modalities of control" (Puar 2017: 119–20), spatiality is crucial to understanding the individual and collective experiences of queer Palestinians. As Puar notes, lack of spatial access impedes queer organizing by preventing movement and the establishment of queer solidarity networks. The result, on display from the first checkpoint scene in *Invisible*

Men, is that what little activism remains possible is dependent on Israeli patronage, thereby reinforcing dynamics of dependency and victimhood.

Space and Experience

In order to more carefully consider how sexuality, spatiality, and power intersect in Israel/Palestine and in these films in particular, I want to turn to Ahmed's exploration of queer phenomenology, in which she analyzes the spatial component of how various forms of queer sexuality and subjectivity are lived and experienced. For Ahmed (2006: 67–70), if orientation describes the relationship and direction one takes in relation to surrounding objects, sexual orientation suggests a trajectory of one's desire and that heterosexual desire is a straight line while other forms of desire that are "queer"—which means "twisted" or crosswise—are deviations. This produces different spatial experiences for queer people, who might experience the straight world in a slantwise fashion; living a queer life has a "disorienting effect" (11), and it causes queer people to seek out certain spaces, such as bars, streets, rooms in which "welcome shadows fall and linger" (105). There is a sense in which queer bodies inhabit space in a more cautious and intentional fashion but also a sense that their presence affects the spaces they inhabit, even if temporarily. Ahmed writes that in a straight world, "queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence . . . but to listen to the sound of 'the what' that fleets" (106). Indeed, it shows the importance of attention to the temporary and sometimes surreptitious nature of queer movement, appropriation, and habitation of space. Notably, Palestinian queer activists have also increasingly emphasized modes of being and experientiality as part of a rejection of single-issue politics in favor of more intersectional approaches. Walaa Alqaisiya (2018: 31) argues for an embrace of "queering and twisting" and of queerness as a relational process and mode of being. If, as Mikki Stedler (2018: 52) suggests, queer Palestinian anticolonial critiques are "always already mediated by hegemonic critical frameworks" in ways that burden, limit, and silence them, perhaps a reorientation toward modes of being and embodiment might make space for the political to emerge *from* queer experiences.

Ahmed's (2006: 2) framing of orientation, deviation, and queerness as spatial and phenomenological, with its emphasis on the "importance of lived experience" and the relationship of bodies to surroundings and objects, can offer a corrective to discussions of queerness, such as those that often occur in relation to Israel/Palestine, in which lived experience is evaluated based on the extent to

which it affirms long-established political positions and claims. Here is where, following Ahmed and others, I seek to partially escape the framing of these documentaries to see how the characters' presence within, and the use of, certain Israeli and Palestinian spaces has a queering effect. Hochberg (2010: 591), in her study of queer representations at Israeli military checkpoints, identifies the stakes of such an effect in her articulation of a subversive effect. As she argues, "It is the queered body that 'speaks back,' reaffirms its desirability, and manipulates the gaze that attempts to control it fully." Identifying the moment of speaking back, of queering and disorienting spaces and bodies, however fleeting and temporary, reveals modes of political contestation that emerge from lived experiences that might otherwise remain invisible because they do not fit into certain discourses of politics and rights.

Queering Hostile Spaces

An examination of how characters inhabit the urban spaces of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv will help demonstrate how the films depict the effect of their presence in these cities, thereby revealing a more subversive subtext to the films that is often obscured by their clumsy and sometimes harmful framing. *City of Borders* takes place primarily in Jerusalem. Given the city's cultural, political, and historical importance, its representation is overdetermined by an excess of iconic images (the Old City, the Western Wall, the Dome of the Rock, just to name a few) recognized across the world. The film gestures to this globally resonant landscape but turns it askance.

Establishing shots depict the city's recognizable landmarks but often through a fence of barbed wire or from an angle that makes visible the wall separating Jerusalem from the West Bank (fig. 2). This sets the viewer in proximity to, but also apart from, Jerusalem as it exists in a global imaginary, forcing the viewer to identify instead with the position of the film's gay characters, who live within or near Jerusalem but are excluded from the conservative, religious city's mainstream. The film emphasizes the extent to which these characters are fenced in and confined by depicting various spatial divisions and constrictions. The film's main Palestinian subject, Boody, experiences multiple intertwined forms of claustrophobia and confinement. In Ramallah he has nowhere to express his gay identity. His cramped bedroom is described as the only "dance floor" in Ramallah, where being openly gay is unheard of. He is shown sneaking across the West Bank barrier to travel from Ramallah to Jerusalem by peeling away an opening in a fence and crawling through. Indeed, the film's depiction of space in general



Figure 2. A Jerusalem church is visible behind the Israeli separation barrier in Yun Suh's *City of Borders* (2009).

is highly claustrophobic, with multiple shots using handheld cameras navigating through the city's narrow and crowded alleys, all of which take on a slightly sinister tone given what the film reveals about the city's hostility to queer bodies. These shots convey the need for a refuge, a safe space from the pressures and tensions of living in such a place, and of course in the film this takes the form of the bar that all of the film's subjects frequent.

The film establishes a strong contrast between an unwelcoming urban environment, both public and private, and the oasis of the gay bar, which, according to the film, draws people from across Jerusalem's ethnic and religious divides. Located near the Green Line that once divided East and West Jerusalem, the Shushan is a space that both inhabits the myriad borders of Jerusalem and moves beyond them. Patrons and employees speak of the Shushan in naive and almost utopian terms, as a "melting pot" that transcends the divisions of the city and the region. Rebecca Stein's description of Fox's *The Bubble* as a film that espouses the notion that "queer desire and sociality can bridge the divide between Israelis and Palestinians" where traditional politics has failed (Stein 2010: 518) applies to *City of Borders* as well. Shots from within the bar emphasize in turn the mixture and indistinguishability of its Israeli, Palestinian, Muslim, Jewish, religious, and secular patrons. One shot depicts a religious, Jewish man wearing a kippa dancing with a group of men who appear more secular, and in another a Palestinian drag queen takes the stage. In other shots, extremely short takes and dark lighting on the dance floor make it nearly impossible to identify the ethnicity or religiosity of those

depicted. In both instances, the ways in which this particular space is depicted transposes utopian tropes of Jerusalem from a religious imaginary and toward a queer imaginary. It situates the bar and its patrons as a version of the utopian ideal that the larger Jerusalem outside the bar's walls repeatedly fails to live up to, as emphasized by the shots of the spatially and culturally divided city. Moreover, the refiguring of queerness as a liberating force (partially and temporarily) contests the notion of Palestinian and gay identities as mutually exclusive.

The bar is not completely self-contained, despite its incognito locale and low profile. We frequently see the bar's activity and its patrons overflow its doors, spilling into the network of narrow side streets that surround it. Many shots depict the characters outside the bar smoking, chatting, and laughing loudly. The film highlights a subtle effect of Shushan's presence within the larger space of Jerusalem. The one moment in the film in which this effect bursts into the open is the Jerusalem pride parade, which as in many cities exists in symbiosis with the city's gay nightlife. This produces one of the tensest moments in the film, as the parade's participants, under heavy security, recall a stabbing attack that took place the previous year. Even those opposed to the bar's existence acknowledge its transformative effect, with one interviewee condemning the bar's attempt to turn the "holy city into the homo city" as a form of violence perpetrated against the traditions and religious significance of Jerusalem. That this opinion is widely held is particularly horrifying, given that the Shushan itself has faced repeated acts of hate-fueled violence, including a firebombing, but this backlash reveals the extent to which the film views the bar's presence as one that *does* queer and disorient Jerusalem, both culturally and spatially.

Unlike the conservative Jerusalem, Tel Aviv's reputation as an LGBT-friendly city has become well established since the 1990s, and this is increasingly reflected on-screen (Cohen 2011: 25–26). It is marketed worldwide as a gay travel destination, consistently appearing on "top ten" lists for global LGBT travel in recent years.¹¹ However, it is also heavily invested in its identity as a Jewish space. Founded as a suburb of the Palestinian port town of Jaffa, Tel Aviv is known as the first Hebrew city. It is emblematic of the Zionist project's aspirations to recreate European modernity in the region, as seen in its layout and architecture, which reflects the International Style (Bauhaus) that was popular in Europe at the time of the Tel Aviv's construction (Cohen 2011: 27; Mann 2006: 161–62). As a result of this history, the city is often coded as almost exclusively Jewish, and more specifically Ashkenazi (European) Jewish. In this sense, the city's recent attempts to market itself as a global LGBT destination is not a departure from the city's spatial and historical orientation westward but rather represents a new manifestation of

Tel Aviv's self-conception as Western and modern. As Nir Cohen (2011: 25) notes, the presence of a visible gay community permits Tel Aviv "to imagine itself as the Western metropolis it has aspired to be," so it is no coincidence that the audience for Tel Aviv's gay rebranding is overwhelmingly upwardly mobile, white, and European/American gay men (Tepper 2013). As the quintessential Zionist city, it also becomes a site for the expression of anxieties about the status and failures of the state and the Zionist project, often in grotesque and dystopian terms.¹² Given this history, the effect of the gay Palestinian characters' presence here contests the imaginary of the city as a Jewish space by showing the spaces and modes in which the Palestinian characters inhabit the city, despite and apart from its Zionist signifiers.

Like *City of Borders's* depiction of Jerusalem, *Invisible Men* eschews the typical images associated with the city—its beaches, markets, cafes, and squares—for side streets, dark alleys, and cramped living quarters. An early scene establishes the ways in which Louie, one of the subjects of the film, moves through Tel Aviv as he seeks asylum. A Jewish Israeli volunteer for the organization that is helping Louie teaches him how to move through the city incognito, as shown in figure 3. He instructs him to stop in shadowy areas, so that he is not visible to passing cars. The camera depicts them walking down side streets filled with trash, lined with shuttered shops, and largely empty except for the occasional passerby on a bicycle or at intersections with more lively streets. In this part of the film, Louie resides in south Tel Aviv, which contains significant populations of migrants and refugees from Africa, a population that has become a site of intense political debate in Israel and at times has led to racially motivated violence against asylum seekers (Kalir 2015: 590). Yet while we might expect that these surroundings would help Louie avoid standing out and that a multiracial cosmopolitan milieu would give him cover, he feels the need to disguise himself as Jewish by wearing a Star of David necklace to blend in. This moment reveals a selective and performative nature of diversity in Tel Aviv, in which queerness and forms of difference that do not threaten the city's white, European identity are welcomed, while other minorities must disguise themselves and walk in the shadows.

At one point in the film, a friend who is more connected with the gay Palestinian community in Tel Aviv takes Louie to a gay Arab party, held monthly in a secret location. They are dropped off on a nondescript side street, where only those who know where to go have access. Much like the Shushan in *City of Borders*, the party space feels incognito and secret, a feeling that is heightened by the filmmaker's decision not to film inside the party. Yet unlike the Shushan, it is not discreetly located because it is predominantly gay but rather because it is pre-



Figure 3. Louie receives advice on navigating Tel Aviv incognito in *The Invisible Men* (2013).

dominantly *Arab* and gay. It reflects both the exclusion of Palestinians from the Tel Aviv gay scene—and by extension from its access to global networks of gay culture of which Tel Aviv has become a crucial component—and the ways in which they contest this exclusion. Its marginal location reflects this disenfranchisement, but we also see liberating moments: men standing outside in the alley holding hands and kissing; others in drag or in short-shorts that clearly mark them as gay. For at least this moment, we get a glimpse of an exuberant Palestinian gay life that defies the narrative of impossibility by claiming space within a white, Jewish city.

This is a contradictory moment in the film. The filmmaker's decision not to enter the party reinforces the distance between the characters and the viewer, suggesting foreignness and inaccessibility rather than solidarity. However, after the party, Louie begins to imagine an alternative to exile, saying he does not want to go abroad: "I want to breathe my culture, my land." For the first time, he envisions the possibility of a different kind of gay life, even in an unwelcoming cultural and political space. The fact that this party—and Louie's thoughts of staying—are partial and temporary suggests that a full resolution of the tension between the city's proclaimed progressiveness and its hostility toward Palestinians is unlikely, but it shows the existence of an alternative—even if it is fleeting and hidden—to the framework of impossibility. Here we see a tension between this moment and the larger narrative of the film, which begins with the premise that being closeted is a sign of suppressed and incomplete selfhood. For a brief instance, the furtive,

“closeted” gay Arab party allows Louie to imagine a fulfilling life here, a notion for which normative narratives of coming out, pride, and liberation make little space.

Oriented, which the filmmaker frames as depicting subjects who are “finding their direction, searching for their direction” (McDonald 2015) is explicitly spatial, beginning with its title. Unlike *Invisible Men*, *Oriented* emphasizes the more prominent aspects of the city and its spaces and uses its Palestinian characters to reinhabit primarily Jewish spaces in order to view these spaces from a different angle, perhaps reflecting the film’s stated desire to transcend otherness (McDonald 2015). In one scene, it uses such strategies to reveal the failure of Tel Aviv to live up to its marketing as an inclusive gay space. One of the main characters (Khader) bikes through Tel Aviv at night. The camera alternates between close-up shots of him on the bicycle, wearing a zip-up hoodie, with the blurred lights of the streetscape behind him, and shots of people out enjoying the evening. In one shot, he bikes past a group of people sitting on benches. They face away from him, toward the sidewalk, but a few turn around and stare at him as he passes. Their fleeting expressions display a mix of interest and suspicion, but with no evident desire to engage with the passerby and with an acknowledgment on the part of all involved that they will briefly inhabit the same space but not interact. A few seconds later, he passes two men holding hands and walking down a boulevard, and again, his point of view places him behind them, so the camera only sees them from the back and to the side, though they do not notice him and turn around. This sequence emphasizes Khader’s exteriority, anonymity paired with marked difference, and isolation, even when surrounded by people. This reception encourages him to move quickly through the city, as he exists within the urban landscape but is not a part of it and remains off to the side, even as he inhabits the same spaces. This presents a noteworthy contrast to the Tel Aviv that is marketed to an international gay audience, in which an image of a gay couple holding hands would be depicted from the front and take center stage. By viewing Tel Aviv’s lively, progressive urban life askance, from behind and to the side, the camera opens up a critical distance between the viewer and the city and reveals the extent to which this particular image of the city is predicated on a Jewish, white, privileged gaze. It defamiliarizes the city’s beaches and boulevards by mimicking the way the film’s Palestinian characters experience a city explicitly oriented away from them. By reorienting the camera’s gaze away from the privileged Jewish vantage point, *Oriented* reveals some of the exclusionary effects of the ways in which Tel Aviv is narrated and marketed.

In other scenes, *Oriented* uses extreme close-up shots and darkness to

reimagine Tel Aviv as a space that moves beyond its current Western-oriented, Jewish-centric self-conception. One short sequence depicts one of the film's characters, Fadi, drinking at a bar. It begins with several close-up shots of the drink in his hand, of one hand fidgeting; and in one shot in which he takes a sip, we can see his hand, the glass, and part of his face for a brief second before they go out of focus. Viewers are able to identify Fadi only because his facial features and piercings have become familiar, but the shots produce a sense of anonymity, both of the individual and of the place. In another scene, the friends return to Tel Aviv after a stressful visit with Fadi's family, and they make their way to a club where they can dance and find relief from the pressures of the day. They dance in a dimly lit bar, barely recognizable among a throng of dancing men, as they revel in this moment of release and anonymity. In both instances the characters utilize majority-Jewish public and semipublic spaces in a way that stymies the policing and identification of ethnicity and identity—a complex and ambiguous but constant preoccupation in Israel/Palestine.¹³ The men and the spaces they visit are darkly lit and disjointedly filmed, allowing these scenes to separate Tel Aviv from its distinctively Jewish features and instead to depict a more generic urban space, harnessing the anonymous quality, at once alienating and liberating, of many modern metropolises.¹⁴ If *Invisible Men* shows a Tel Aviv that hides in plain sight, *Oriented* attempts to reenvision a Tel Aviv separated from its cultural and historical significance as a Jewish, Zionist showpiece.

This revised depiction of Tel Aviv has its limits as political critique; it does not, for instance, interrogate the blind spots inherent in the notion of Western metropolises as “gay friendly” spaces.¹⁵ However, to an extent, it does make space for political commentary of the sort that is absent in the film's framings, which as Haddad and others note tend to shirk substantive engagement with the systemic aspects of Israeli occupation and rule in Palestine (Haddad 2016). A central part of the narrative of *Oriented* is the characters' involvement in a group called Qambuta (cauliflower), an activist organization that uses new media such as YouTube to combat homophobia and gender inequality in Palestinian society. While the group's impact is unclear from either the documentary or outside research, its message focuses on challenging oppressive social structures that intersect with and are reproduced and reinforced by Israeli state practices of discrimination and occupation. A crucial scene for establishing the relationship between the characters and the space they inhabit depicts the filming of a music video for Qambuta. They use an abandoned building in Tel Aviv for filming; the interior is covered with debris and graffiti, with walls in disrepair and missing windows. They do not

try to clean or beautify the space for the video but instead they add to the chaos and mess. They throw eggs, they shower themselves with confetti, they scream. They reach through walls to hold each other. Refusing to adhere to the limits of the space, they instead reuse it in the culmination of their attempt to produce a queer, Palestinian space in Tel Aviv. Later, as they watch the video they made, one member declares, “We are Palestine, we are queer, and we are here”—a means of claiming a space that is not meant for them through dissidence and disorientation. With music, choreography, and irreverence, the characters of *Oriented* display an exuberance that allows a release of tension, much like the gay party in *Invisible Men*. But here exhilaration comes not through the escape from political reality but through engagement and the articulation of a political message. Though the message itself is simplistic and naive, its significance derives from the act of crafting and stating the message and of claiming possession of a space to do so, even if just for a moment.

Conclusion

In all of the films discussed, a tension lies at the heart of the depiction of Palestinian gay life. There is a desire to draw attention to the very real suffering of many, but the attention is often voyeuristic, constituting a formulaic, almost teleological narrative of irresolvable personal and communal conflict between gayness and Palestinianness that overwhelms and subsumes the complexities and ambiguities of these men’s lived experiences. Indeed, this framing more often than not reinforces this notion of incompatibility: Louie and Abdu in *Invisible Men* flee to Europe; Boody in *City of Borders* likewise migrates to the United States; and the Shushan goes out of business by the end of the documentary. The impossibility narrative seems doomed to produce failure. However, it is possible to imagine a different framing that could produce a more liberating message by emphasizing the queer, subversive, persistent, and even sometimes exuberant presence of this population. This requires taking the moments in which this presence makes itself known not as an exception to or escape from the political realities faced by these characters but rather as a means of engaging and contesting them. The answer, perhaps, lies not in the unlikely resolution of the complex and often hostile reception faced by gay Palestinians but rather in acknowledgment of the lived experiences through which gay Palestinians, on a daily basis, get by and make space for themselves despite deeply ingrained hostility to one or both of the identifiers “gay” and “Palestinian.”

Notes

1. A statement by the Palestinian queer activist group alQaws (2015) takes a stronger stance than Haddad against the film by critiquing its framing, its focus on and generally positive representation of Tel Aviv, and its claim to a universal representation of Palestinian queer experiences. However, the statement also notes explicitly that it is not a critique of the individual lives, choices, and experiences depicted in *Oriented*.
2. For instance, Dina Georgis (2013: 234) argues that young queer activists in Lebanon do not simply naively adopt Western sexual terminology and identity, but rather negotiate their sexualities in complex ways, and Evren Savcı (2016b: 377–78) examines how such processes of negotiation and reconfiguration of such categories has occurred among LGBT communities in contemporary Turkey.
3. Examples include Maysaloun Hamoud's *In Between* (2016) and Shamim Sharif's *I Can't Think Straight* (2008).
4. While LGBT communities in Israel enjoy support from a significant portion of the population and rhetorical acceptance by a number of leftist, centrist, and right-wing political parties, Itay Chay Machtei Samov and Yael Yishai (2018: 71) argue that the religious-nationalist character of the state places limits on the progress that has been made, noting in particular the absence of marriage rights for same-sex couples.
5. See, for instance, a 2013 special issue of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* that examines these questions in depth, several articles from which are cited here (Al-Samman and El-Ariss 2013).
6. Just a couple of the binaries that Puar (2007: 24) names are assimilation/transgression and religiosity/secularity.
7. As Puar (2013: 338) further observes in a later discussion of homonationalism, "Settler colonialism has a long history of articulating its violence through the protection of serviceable figures such as women and children, and now the homosexual."
8. A textbook example of such homonationalist rhetoric is then-presidential candidate Donald Trump's remarks following a massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando in 2016, in which he sought to portray immigration and Islam as a threat to the LGBT community and claimed that restrictions on Muslim immigration would make LGBT individuals, as well as women, safer (Collinson and Diamond 2016).
9. It is important to note here that the categories of Muslim, Arab, and Islam are often conflated, which reflects both Orientalizing tendencies and the commonly held belief that true queerness cannot coexist with religiosity. As Puar (2007: 13) notes, "The queer agential subject can only ever be fathomed outside the norming constrictions of religion."
10. Writing of Turkey and the role of class in determining access to certain modes of queer self-definition, Evren Savcı (2016b: 378) offers an apt and succinct summary of the shortcomings of the Western versus traditional framework: "Despite the usefulness of analyses that investigate identification with westernized sexual categories

versus ‘traditional’ ones, we need to also pay attention to subjects’ articulations and enactments of those identifications in order to understand other mechanisms that influence classed queer experiences.”

11. Beginning around 2010, the city of Tel Aviv started aggressively marketing itself as a gay destination, which resulted in a proliferation of celebrity visits, articles that proclaim it to be “the gayest city on earth” (Muther 2016), and a rapid increase in gay tourism (Tepper 2013). Although primarily an initiative of the Tel Aviv mayor, such marketing fits firmly into the larger pinkwashing narrative of Israel as a pro-gay oasis in a hostile region.
12. Karen Grumberg makes this argument in her analysis of Orly Castel-Bloom’s depictions of a dystopian version of Tel Aviv (2011: 107–11).
13. Even as the establishment and policing of a strict Arab-Jewish binary is crucial to the construction of Israeli nationalism, Ella Shohat demonstrates the ambiguity and complexity of such a project, particularly as it pertains to Mizrahim, or Jews from the Arab world, whose very existence subverts the idea of an easily discernible ethnic difference (Shohat 1999: 12). The result is a preoccupation with ethnic difference that, as Carol Bardenstein (2005: 99–100) shows, appears frequently in film, as directors and writers use cross-casting, ethnic disguise, and passing both diegetically and extradiegetically to variously highlight, reaffirm, or subvert the line between Jew and Arab in Israel and Palestine.
14. Scholars who study literary depictions of urban spaces have noted the dual effects of the anonymity that a city, with its mass of strangers, affords. Robert Alter (2005: 103) writes that “the modern metropolis seems to earn a triple-A rating for angst, alienation, and anomie,” while Hana Wirth-Nesher (1996: 198) sees the semi-anonymous encounters that are characteristic of urban life as “a catalyst for a new kind of space that only the city makes possible.”
15. For more on how pinkwashing and homonationalism function in global gay cities, see Ritchie 2015: 619–20.

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