



A tattooed inscription: "Jaffa, Bride of Palestine."
Raafat Hattab, *Houria* (*Freedom/Mermaid*, Palestine, 2011)

Queer/Palestinian Cinema: A Critical Conversation on Palestinian Queer and Women's Filmmaking

Colleen Jankovic with Nadia Awad

In October 2011, a group of filmmakers, scholars, curators, and activists participated in “Queer/Palestinian: Critical Strategies in Palestinian Queer and Women’s Filmmaking” at Yale University and the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University. The panels were co-organized by Nadia Awad, who curated the video program, Colleen Jankovic, who introduced the political and conceptual context for the panel, and *Camera Obscura* editorial collective member Patricia White, who chaired both events. Panelists included Nadia Yaqub (University of North Carolina), curator and filmmaker Victoria Moufawad-Paul (Toronto’s A Space Gallery), Brooklyn-based filmmaker Suzy Salamy, Helga Tawil-Souri (New York University), and Raafat Hattab, a Palestinian performance artist who participated from Jerusalem through live video chat. Following a screening of eight new short Palestinian video works, the panelists and audience discussed a range of issues, including intersections of cinema, queer-

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ness, and the struggle for Palestinian sovereignty. The global political climate of grassroots organizing and protest sparked by the Arab Spring provided a charged context in which to consider work by queer and women Palestinian artists in close relation to transformational politics and social movements.

Several significant developments in queer and feminist Palestinian and solidarity activism made this event possible. In 2011, Al-Qaws for Gender and Sexual Diversity in Palestinian Society (Al-Qaws), Aswat Palestinian Gay Women, and Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (PQBDS) together celebrated a decade of queer Palestinian activism in Israel and the West Bank, enacting new strategies to bring gender and sexual rights to the forefront of a broad social-justice and Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. PQBDS calls for a “comprehensive and consistent boycott,” including of “all Israeli academic and cultural institutions,” until the end of Israeli occupation, apartheid, and settler colonialism, the right of return for Palestinians, full human rights for Palestinians within Israel, and the demise and complete delegitimization of Israeli pinkwashing.¹ As an initiative of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s Brand Israel campaign, *pinkwashing* describes conscious tactics to improve Israel’s image abroad by packaging gay rights and tourism as markers of freedom and tolerance, and by representing Palestinian society as backward and homophobic in comparison. Israeli advocacy organizations, like StandWithUs, promote pinkwashing at educational and cultural institutions and events, including film festivals, across the world.²

While pinkwashing critiques have drawn increasing attention to how queer issues in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are perniciously mobilized by a network of lobby groups, Brand Israel initiatives, and international gay and lesbian organizations, these critiques often fail to consider how queer Palestinians mobilize and understand themselves. The fall 2010 *GLQ* special issue on “Queer Politics in Palestine/Israel” made significant headway toward creating a space for such engagement. The 2011 US tour “Queer Palestinian Activists Talk Politics,” organized by Sarah Schulman with Al-Qaws and Aswat activists, drew unprecedented attention to queer and feminist Palestinian politics and their intersections with broader queer activism.³ Beginning with the premise that Palestinians ought

to determine the terms of their own sovereignty, including gender, sexual, and bodily rights, the NYU and Yale “Queer/Palestinian” program sought to weave independent cultural and artistic production into a larger discussion on Palestinian visions for liberation.

For many of us working on and/or embodying intersections of queerness and Palestine, considering how the broader question of Palestine has become a queer one is crucial. In an interview, Judith Butler explained this more recent alliance between queerness and Palestine: “I think that queer people should have solidarity with those populations whose lives are not considered liveable. That’s a kind of alliance that I would understand as a queer alliance. So that explains why I would—as someone who elaborated a queer theory—be very concerned with the situation in Palestine.”⁴ Haneen Maikey, Al-Qaws’s director, and Lynn Darwich also articulate queerness as a framework for broad social justice, arguing “one of the powerful characteristics of PQBDS is in its ability to link the struggle for sexual and gender diversity with the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice.”⁵ For Maikey and Darwich, queer Palestinian activism cannot be reduced to a liberal individualist bid for inclusion; rather, it invokes a transformative politics from within, one that, based on firsthand knowledge of Palestinian culture and history, expands and complicates the vision for a future Palestine. Maikey and Darwich envision a simple yet radical proposition: that respect for sexual and gender diversity ought to lead, rather than follow, Palestinian liberation.

Addressing such issues in video, Moufawad-Paul’s *Nus Enssas/صن ن ص يص* (*Half a Person*) (Canada, 2011) explores the possibilities and contradictions of diasporic queer Palestinian visibility. *Nus Enssas* combines black-and-white cutout-style animation of an Arabic fable with video footage from Toronto’s 2011 Pride March. Through a double narration of “half a person,” Moufawad-Paul animates and re-genders the fable of a boy—or girl, as a second, echo narration, has it—born with half a body. The child learns to do everything other children do, “but better.” Animation and fable abruptly give way to footage of the group Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QuAIA) marching in Toronto after they were initially excluded by a Toronto Pride ban on the phrase “Israeli Apartheid.” That march, for Moufawad-Paul and others, marked a significant moment when queer and nonqueer Palestinian activism joined forces in Toronto,

prompting her to reflect on the position of diasporic queer Palestinians. Speaking after the films were screened at “Queer/Palestinian,” Moufawad-Paul brought further attention to points of intersection and divergence between queer and Palestinian struggles, suggesting that “as opposed to the kind of western narrative that you must come out of the closet and be a holistic person, instead maybe this kind-of-seen/kind-of-unseen can be a new formation, one that would be ambivalent, of course, but heroic in some way.”⁶ In *Nus Enssas*, queer Palestinians in the diaspora are imagined as a kind of half-person, an alternative to an out/closeted binarism, who, like the fable’s protagonist, emerges “somehow triumphant.”

Yaqub provided a global political context for how either/or categories, like out/closeted, have repeatedly determined the limits of how Palestine is imagined and reimaged in the world. Comparing the first Palestinian speech at the United Nations General Assembly by Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Yassir Arafat to the recent speech by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, Yaqub pointed out that, although these two speeches were different in terms of how they situated Palestine in the world, “essentially these two men faced the same binary choices.” Arafat placed Palestine at the vanguard of third-world national liberation struggles rather than in the camp of the imperialists, while Abbas faced a choice between articulating Palestine within a neoliberal global order of law-abiding citizens or outside that order as terrorists. For Yaqub, post-Second Intifada Palestinian cinema since 2005 represents a form of political discourse that increasingly rejects “this kind of binary vision of the world, searching for and sometimes finding glimmers of an understanding of what something would be outside these two choices.” Remarking on the queer and feminist frame of the “Queer/Palestinian” program, Tawil-Souri wondered what kinds of interventions queer and feminist work can make, particularly given what she described as a fragmented contemporary moment marked by such supposed “posts” as post-Zionist and post-modernist. Tawil-Souri emphasized how the Palestinian struggle, previously understood primarily in terms of national liberation, has changed significantly due to the effect of technologies like the Internet, which created the possibility for seemingly nonterritorial notions of Palestine and diverse forms of Palestinian activism.

Indeed, although there are forms of Palestinian nationalism tied to particular ideas about statehood and borders, there is also a broader Palestinian community whose sense of Palestine and belonging crosses territorial borders—even, or perhaps especially, when they are unable to follow such itineraries themselves. In other words, finding alternative routes of belonging and surviving conditions of fragmentation may in some ways be a defining characteristic of Palestinian unity, explaining what Edward Said characterizes as the “formal instability” marking much of Palestinian literature and art. “Our characteristic mode, then,” Said writes, “is not a narrative, in which scenes take place seriatim, but rather broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testimonials, in which the narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations, and its limitations.”⁷ Moufawad-Paul similarly refers to an “assertion of Palestinian identity and cohesion” in Palestinian cinema that, she writes, “is of course strategic. And the strategic goal is far from insignificant: if there continue to be Palestinians, there may one day be a Palestinian nation again.”⁸

For Awad, the often contradictory position in which Palestinians find themselves when it comes to representation explains the irreverence and wry critical humor of much of Palestinian cinema, diasporic, queer, or otherwise. Awad’s video *Two Adaptations of the Same Novel* (US, 2011) synthesizes two ideologically different versions of the same story of the Mahmoody family—the 1991 melodrama *Not without My Daughter* (dir. Brian Gilbert, US, starring Sally Field), based on the memoir of the same name, and *Without My Daughter* (dir. Alexis Kouros and Kari Tervo, 2002), a Finnish documentary created with the real-life Sayed Mahmoody in an attempt to rebut the Hollywood story of abuse and abduction. Awad described her video’s intention “to unsettle the aesthetics of both the narrative and the documentary, and create this experience where [the viewer is] conscious of every element”—a technique that undermines the visual and rhetorical logic of both films and calls attention to the ways in which they construct truth claims and potentially sympathetic viewing positions.

Reframing dominant narratives was a recurrent theme in the “Queer/Palestinian” program, leading us to consider it a queer critical strategy, or, as Awad described it, “a sensibility . . . not having

a reverence for certain kinds of narratives.” This strategy is evident in a second film by Moufawad-Paul, *Rejoice, O My Heart/ق لببي اف ح* (Canada, 2011), in which clips from Egyptian musicals starring popular Arabic singer and national figure Umm Kulthum are carefully edited to construct intimate moments between Kulthum and other women in the films, drawing out what might otherwise appear as inconsequential seconds in the source films. *Rejoice, O My Heart* opens with text that introduces rumors about Kulthum’s sexuality, and the subsequent playfully erotic editing opens space for modes of desire that are in some ways unlocatable or unverifiable.

Raafat Hattab’s *Houria* (Palestine, 2011), an Arabic word that, spelled as it is in the title frame, suggests translation both to “freedom” (حرية) and to “mermaid” (حورية), shows particular concern for retelling narratives and experimenting with alternative forms of articulation. Images of a mermaid Hattab sprawled at the shoreline of the former Palestinian town of Manshiye—an area between present-day Tel Aviv and Jaffa’s Old City that was destroyed in 1948—are interwoven with Hattab’s aunt’s story of her family’s dispersion during *al nakba* (the catastrophe), which created the Israeli state through the displacement and near-destruction of Palestinian society. Hattab, who remains silent, embodies the *nakba* narrative in *Houria*, particularly in scenes that show traditional Arabic calligraphy reading “Jaffa, Bride of Palestine” being inscribed on Hattab’s chest in a tattoo parlor.⁹ Throughout *Houria*, a queer and feminist perspective reframes a predominantly masculinist narrative of Palestinian national loss and struggle for return through the emphasis on listening to Hattab’s aunt’s voice. Similarly, Hattab performs a kind of in-between state—queerly embodied as neither male nor female, human nor fish, and positioned between the resort beaches of Tel Aviv and the shores of the Old City of Jaffa. Hattab’s work suggests another subversive form of reinscription, since Hattab argues that queer Palestinians “are trying to start a new expression, a new language . . . we can’t just copy-paste the experience from the West.” If Moufawad-Paul and Awad’s films reflect what may be a diasporic strategy of sourcing already existing work to deconstruct dominant and restrictive narrative codes, Hattab’s *Houria* suggests a complementary and parallel urgency to generate new means of expressing and embodying Palestinian culture.

Alaa AbuAsad's *Masturbate bil beit* (Palestine, 2011) was the most explicitly erotic video in the "Queer/Palestinian" program. Referencing Bruce LaBruce's 1999 *SkinFlick*, in which a skinhead masturbates while reading *Mein Kampf*, the video depicts a young man masturbating to a picture that turns out to be Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. AbuAsad's video unapologetically confronts viewers with the desiring embodiment of an unsanitized, non-normative version of queer Palestinianness, an image that irreverently flies in the face of (primarily Israeli and US) depictions of queer Palestinians who need to be saved from homophobic Arab and Muslim societies. In other words, *Masturbate bil beit* defiantly refuses to respond to negative portrayals of Palestinians with a comforting version of queer Palestinian masculinity.

Salamy, in a different way, expands the dominant narrative frame of two Israeli wars in Lebanon (1982 and 2006) through multiple and alternative forms of exhibition. Originally projected from the back of a truck in public spaces around New York City, *1982/2006* (US, 2006) comments on the decontextualization of such images in mainstream media, which limits the scope and significance of images of Israeli military aggression. Juxtaposing nearly identical images of destruction and images of casualties taken nearly twenty-five years apart, the video also portends further iterations of these images while underscoring the need for new representational strategies and modes of viewing. Nazareth-based Eli Rezik's short-form webmovies *Living Alone without Me* (Palestine, 2011) and *Between Us Two* (Palestine, 2011), part of a larger online series, suggest additional distribution alternatives. In Rezik's videos, set among cosmopolitan youth, social taboos such as religious difference and queer desire are taken on through playful subversions of foreground/background image and sound, suggesting the need to find novel ways to address seemingly impossible intimacies.

The unique conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition of each video in the "Queer/Palestinian" program suggest that artistic rejections of binary visions of the world also necessarily take place outside, or to the side of, national institutions and established cultural venues. Since repressive Israeli security can prevent Palestinian films from leaving Palestine, we screened compressed files of *Houria* and *Masturbate bil beit*, with evident pix-

elation serving as a reminder of the challenges, including lack of infrastructure and financial backing, that face Palestinian filmmakers, particularly those that are queer and women.

The format of the “Queer/Palestinian” program was conceived to generate unexpected critical conversations around Palestinian artistic practices in film and intersections with queerness. We hope this brief account of the panel will compel further consideration of the kinds of inquiries the films and filmmakers mentioned here invite from us as academics, activists, allies, and spectators, including the challenge to think about queerness as a strategy, a form of critique, and an alliance.

Notes

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1. “An Open Letter to Queer Academics, Artists, and Activists,” *Palestinian Queers for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions*, 23 February 2011, www.pqbds.com/category/statements/page/2/.
2. Cinema, especially through the Israeli Film Fund and/or Foreign Ministry support, has been an important site for advocating a particular version of Israeli democratic freedom—notable examples include San Francisco’s 2009 Out in Israel festival and Toronto International Film Festival’s (TIFF) 2009 focus on Tel Aviv, both of which featured films by gay Israeli director Eytan Fox and received Foreign Ministry support. In turn, Israeli state-funded LGBT film events have become important sites for academic and cultural boycott activism, like the Toronto Declaration in response to the 2009 TIFF and the public removal of films or decline of film prizes, often led by prominent international filmmakers (see John Greyson’s contribution to this issue).
3. Other notable events include the March 2011 “How Now BDS? Media, Politics, and Queer Activism” panel (part of Israel Apartheid Week in New York City) with John Greyson, Judith Butler, and Jasbir Puar, and the September 2011 “Cultural Boycott of Israel” panel with prominent American Jews and Jewish-Israelis including Udi Aloni and Dalit Baum. Activist Sarah Schulman’s 22 November 2011 *New York Times* op-ed

“Israel and ‘Pinkwashing’” brought the question of pinkwashing into wide cultural debate.

4. Marcus McCann, “Whose Lives Matter? An Interview with Judith Butler,” *Xtra! Canada’s Gay and Lesbian News*, 11 March 2011, www.xtra.ca/public/National/Whose_lives_matter_An_interview_with_Judith_Butler-9866.aspx
5. Haneen Maikey and Lynn Darwich, “From the Belly of Arab Queer Activism: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Bekhsoos.com*, 12 October 2011, www.bekhsoos.com/web/2011/10/from-the-belly-of-arab-queer-activism-challenges-and-opportunities/.
6. The quotations throughout this article from the panel discussion were recorded on a cellphone but have not been distributed.
7. Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 38.
8. Victoria Moufawad-Paul, “Digital Event ’07,” www.e-fagia.org/digevento7curtalk.html (accessed 16 April 2012).
9. “Bride of Palestine” refers to the ancient Palestinian Arab port city and cultural hub of Jaffa. After Israeli occupation the Arab sections of Jaffa were largely destroyed. Contemporary Jaffa is regarded as a kind of suburb of Tel Aviv (indicated by the name for both cities hyphenated as Tel Aviv-Yafo), and is marked by increased gentrification.

Nadia Awad is a visual artist and filmmaker whose work has been exhibited at flux factory, mauve? gallery, and Elizabeth Foundation Center. Her work questions the ways in which meaning is produced through news, documentary, and archives. She is currently producing an open-source interactive documentary on the first queer delegation to Palestine.

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