

Preface

I TRACE MY QUEER CONSCIOUSNESS to 1999, when I was a fifteen-year-old adolescent. I have vivid memories of the time I spent with my male friends, filled with laughter and joy. But I also experienced bewilderment and disorientation when we looked at pictures of women and when my friends expressed their attraction to them.

“Why do I not desire the same? Why am I finding myself drawn to other boys?” I asked myself. But the mere thought of exploring the answers to my questions led to feelings of deep shame. There was no conceptual tool kit or vocabulary and no words in Arabic that came to mind to help me navigate what was becoming a journey of self-discovery.

“When two men lie together in bed, the throne of God shakes with anger!” After hearing these words from a preacher through the loudspeakers of a local mosque as I walked past it one day, I vowed to never let anyone know about the thoughts raging inside me.

I then became particularly sensitive when strangers and family members commented that my voice was not deep enough, my grip not firm enough, my walk not straight enough, or my posture not bold enough. I felt grateful and relieved that I attended the Ramallah Friends School, a Quaker institution established in Palestine in 1869. Books become my sanctuary, and theater became my escape. I loved taking on roles as Tiresias and King Arthur, because they made me feel as if I could project a more masculine self.

The Second Intifada, or Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation,

was omnipresent in 2001. I remember the visceral malaise in my stomach from eating only lentils while trapped under military curfew. The sounds of helicopters, bulldozers, bombs, funeral processions, and protests all around us were frightening, but eventually I could not fall asleep unless I heard the shooting outside. The soldiers raided our house, targeting the men. They took my grandfather, father, and me for questioning. I trembled with fear. "Be strong; be a man." I could hear my father saying that to me without him even having to utter the words. But he, too, was quivering. I was frozen while attempting to broaden my shoulders.

I pushed myself harder than ever that year, achieving the rank of first in my class and being elected president of the student government. Yet nothing cured the melancholy of realizing that I could not live up to the expectations of hegemonic masculinity placed on men in my society.

I was thrilled to arrive at Swarthmore College in 2002, an institution outside of Philadelphia that was also founded by the Quakers. The violence of the Second Intifada continued back home. I worried about my family every day, and I was consumed with guilt for leaving my people behind for this idyllic campus, all of which is an arboretum. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, were still fresh. "I never knew there was affirmative action for terrorists!" A fellow student exclaimed that after discovering my Palestinian background. I was in shock. I wracked my brain for a response but was frozen in silence.

Being one of a few token Arab students was challenging. But I loved my experience overall. And I was committed to fitting Middle Eastern Studies into my academic pursuits while educating my peers about the region and promising myself to try to never be silent about anything again.

I also read Audre Lorde for the first time. She writes, "For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us."¹

I developed the courage to speak with openly queer students but soon found I could not escape my feelings of alienation. Gripped by my anxiety about coming to terms with who I am given the constant violence back home, I had difficulty relating to queer students. I remember how my sense of isolation deepened when a peer was complaining that his parents were pressuring him to limit himself to a single boyfriend; he wanted to pursue multiple partners. The difference between our concerns at that time was vast. Silence continued its hold on me.

In the summer after my sophomore year, I stepped out of the train station in the Castro District of San Francisco for the first time. I stood at the top of the hill, with the enormous rainbow flag above me and smaller rainbow flags at each stop sign below. Numerous same-sex couples were holding hands or walking all around me. I could not hold back my tears. A stranger saw me, walked over, gave me a hug, and said, “I know. I know. It will be okay.”

Through my internship at the American Civil Liberties Union in California that summer, I had unconsciously made a gay pilgrimage to San Francisco. There I discovered the group SWANABAQ (South West Asian and North African Bay Area Queers). It finally dawned on me that I was not the only gay Arab on the planet. I had my first relationship that summer, began to accept myself, and then revealed my sexual orientation to my closest friends. But I remained vigilant about protecting my privacy.

I spent the fall semester of my junior year of college at the American University in Cairo and then the spring semester at the American University of Beirut. Farha Ghannam, my advisor and mentor at Swarthmore and a brilliant Middle East anthropologist, introduced me to anthropology and helped me gain a deep appreciation for the discipline. She also served as my faculty mentor for the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, a scholarship program for minority students interested in becoming academics. Ghannam encouraged me to conduct thesis research comparing the LGBTQ communities in Beirut and Cairo. I fell in love with ethnography and found it exhilarating to be immersed in queer social milieus in the Middle East. I spent significant time in Beirut at Helem (“Dream” in Arabic), the first LGBTQ organization in the Arab world. This allowed me to bring together two salient identities: being queer and being Arab. Up until that point, I had experienced these identities only in tension with each other, and it has simply been with time that I have learned to appreciate how connected they are in me.

I was taken with the scholarship of Palestinian academic Joseph Massad, particularly his critiques of what he terms the “gay international” agenda. I drew on that work, particularly his article “Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World,”² and Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* to problematize the universalizing of LGBTQ categories from the West to the Middle East. In my thesis, I described the gay flag in the United States as a form of nationalism and cited Foucault’s assertion that the “Western man has become a confessing animal”³ (which he linked to Catholicism) to delineate the limits of coming out discourses for queer Arabs.

In discovering Massad's work, I was excited to finally see the topic of gay Arabs taken seriously as a scholarly endeavor. That led me to internalize his analysis. It was only later, with more self-confidence, that I realized I needed to consider that analysis more critically. I then questioned the simple binaries between East and West that I had reified in the thesis project. My coming out had taken place in an academic setting; so queerness, scholarship, and academic acceptance have all been tied up for me. I had excelled in academia as a way to compensate for the shame of homosexuality. Personal self-acceptance has subsequently enabled me to embrace a more nuanced academic voice.

I graduated from Swarthmore in the spring of 2006, receiving an award the institution named that year—the Edward Said/Audre Lorde Scholar-Activism Award. It was an honor, but it was also daunting to receive because of my experiences with impostor syndrome in the academy and because of how towering both those figures were in my intellectual and political imagination.

With both apprehension and excitement, I arrived at Harvard University that fall, matriculating at the Kennedy School of Government for the master's in public policy program. I was eager to undergo professional graduate training after my liberal arts undergraduate education. The knots in my stomach I had the first year of college returned to me that fall when I realized that I was the only Palestinian student at the Kennedy School and merely one of a handful of the LGBTQ caucus members there. It was in becoming increasingly open about my Palestinian and queer identities that I grew more secure, self-loving, and at ease at Harvard.

I returned home to Palestine the summer after my first year of graduate school to intern with the unit overseeing high-level Palestinian negotiations with Israel. My family did not yet know about my gay identity, but a number of close friends and colleagues did, and they were supportive. They shared with me that a Palestinian who had recently worked with the same negotiations team in a significant position had been completely forthcoming to everyone—including at the highest levels of the Palestinian political leadership—about the fact that he was gay. They also shared that no one had given him any trouble about his sexuality. That possibility had been unimaginable to me until that point. I had never heard of, let alone met, an openly queer Palestinian.

After completing my master's degree, I immediately began the joint PhD program in anthropology and Middle Eastern studies at Harvard. I chose to study the politics of international humanitarian aid in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Israel's military offensives in the Gaza Strip, and the unfold-

ing humanitarian crisis there, became increasingly devastating. I channeled my desperation into research about the topic.

During my final pre-fieldwork visit home, I began to anticipate what to expect upon my return the following year for fourteen consecutive months of ethnographic research. I wondered whether I could ever resettle in Palestine and live as an openly gay man. "Is it safe?" I asked myself. I had heard about people being disowned or met with violence from their families due to their sexuality. I had also heard about queer Palestinians being forced by the Israeli occupation forces to serve as collaborators and informants.

I confided in a dear friend about my sexuality, and he became deeply uncomfortable. I had been very close with him and his family in Ramallah. They were devout Palestinian Christians, and his father worked for a local church. The religious traditions of both Christianity and Islam in the Levant have been inhospitable to compassionate reception of homosexuality in the contemporary context. When I went to see my friend and to visit his family the next day, his father opened the door, his face filled with sadness, and then informed me that he was the only one home. He invited me to sit on the rooftop with him and proceeded to say that my friend had revealed to him that I was gay and that this is unacceptable in our society. He said that I could not speak with them anymore unless I sought to change my sexuality through particular church services. It was devastating for me to bear the pain this caused. I looked at the sun as it began to set, felt the breeze of the evening air, mustered every bit of strength I could, and then graciously replied that it was not possible for me to change. No one from that family has spoken to me since.

During my last night at home that summer, as I looked around into the caring eyes of my family members, I imagined them withdrawing their love for me if they discovered my secret. The thought of living in exile as a result of familial homophobia was too much to bear.

In 2010, I established a research base in Bethlehem and began my fieldwork on international aid. Only days after my arrival, one of my straight family members, whom I had never come out to about my sexuality, introduced me to one of his gay friends in the hopes that we would date each other. He succeeded in facilitating this romantic relationship. It came as a complete surprise to me that a relative would not only know about this aspect of my identity but also be so supportive. He shared that he promised to keep his lips sealed but that I should also remember, as he put it, that "we are your family, and we love you, and we just want you to be happy." I have never been able

to forget those words. They also planted seeds of confidence for me to come out to my parents two years later, even though I was consumed by dread; one never knew what kind of visceral response to expect.

I discovered that in the years I had been away studying in the United States, a queer Palestinian movement in Israel and the West Bank had emerged. I then joined an LGBTQ Palestinian organization, Al-Qaws (short for *Qaws Quzah*, or “rainbow” in Arabic), and became an activist with the group, co-facilitating a workshop series in the West Bank on queer Palestinian empowerment. Through this work, I saw how the figure of Joseph Massad, whom I had admired as a college student during my thesis writing, loomed over queer activists in the region. They shudder at the prospect of being called “local informants” of the “gay international” by him and his followers. Being immersed in the queer Palestinian movement forced me to revisit my previous embrace of Massad’s framework and to understand how East/West binaries, the language we use, and the political projects we espouse are not black and white in the increasingly globalized and transnational world in which we live. I have since aspired to pursue engaged scholarship that makes room for more complexity.

Two Palestinian organizations and initiatives, Al-Qaws and Aswat (“Voices” in Arabic, also known as Palestinian Gay Women), came together in 2011 and worked with prominent queer writer and activist Sarah Schulman to organize the first LGBTQ delegation from the United States to Palestine. I agreed to serve as one of two coleaders of the delegation, which would accompany the sixteen American delegates for the full ten days in Palestine. On the eve of the delegation’s start, I decided that it was time to come out to my broader family. My mother’s response will be with me forever. Upon sharing that I am gay with her in Arabic, she replied,

The reason that I am crying is that I cannot believe you have gone through all of this without me. I wish that I had been able to be by your side. But I am now comforted that you have come to me. I am proud of you for how far you have come. I did know deep down inside, like every mother does, but we hold on to the doubt until it is confirmed to us otherwise. I want you to know that my respect for you has only increased. This is something incredibly difficult in our society, but you are my son. I love you, forever and always.

No words of my own have ever been able to communicate the depth of my gratitude for her words.

Buoyed by familial support, I have since become public in my activism in the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement. Trips home to Palestine during Christmas and summer breaks also have kept me connected with the developments on the ground for my community of queer Palestinians. I am now determined to help advance a new generation of scholarship in LGBTQ Middle East/North African studies.

In writing this book, I chose to approach it using a global framework of solidarity with Queer Palestine and to include my autoethnography, which traces my own political and intellectual development as a person, activist, and scholar over the past twenty years. I selected diagnostic events that mark critical junctures in my consciousness as a queer Palestinian. This inclusion also speaks to the coming out genre with which many queer readers are familiar. In my own life thus far, I have been a witness and participant in the Palestinian landscape in three distinct periods: before the emergence of the queer movement in Palestine, after the rise of the movement locally in 2002 and internationally in 2009, and currently in its moment of plateau that began in 2012.

By exploring my own engagement with the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement, I offer an autoethnographic⁴ account of how I have come to approach the issues surrounding Queer Palestine as an academic and activist. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner link autoethnography to autobiographies, defining autoethnographies as works that “self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation.”⁵ As an anthropologist, I am drawn to a particular form of autoethnography—analytic autoethnography as delineated by Leon Anderson. He explains, “Analytic autoethnography has five key features. It is ethnographic work in which the researcher (a) is a full member in a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; (d) engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; and (e) is committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.”⁶ Finally, this autoethnography demonstrates how my analysis and knowledge production in the domain of Queer Palestine shape and are shaped by my positionality and my deeply close and personal proximity to this material. As Paul Atkinson writes, “The very possibility of social life and of understanding it ethnographically depends on an elementary principle: the homology between the social actors who are being studied

and the social actor who is making sense of their actions. It is this principle that generates the ethnographic enterprise.²⁷

In this text, I was willing to study myself critically to put myself under the same analytical scrutiny as others, to situate where I am, and to decenter/denaturalize my authorial perspective by situating it. I draw attention to the places that animated my queer consciousness and the trajectory of the global queer Palestinian solidarity movement. And although I certainly cannot speak for all queer Palestinians, I invite readers to join me in reflecting on my deeply personal journey.