Queer/Humanitarian Visibility: The Emergence of the Figure of *The Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee*

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ABSTRACT *Prior to the Syrian uprisings in 2011, Syrian queer and trans* populations were rather unknown and irrelevant to global LGBT politics, Western media, and humanitarian efforts. This changed considerably after the uprisings as representations steadily increased and proliferated on social media and in journalistic accounts. This article traces this shift and argues that queer and trans* Syrians became visible primarily through a queer/humanitarian media-visibility paradigm and the construction, consolidation, and circulation of the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee. Drawing on analyses of what I consider pivotal events and media representations as well as journalistic writings, this article maps out the ways in which the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee and the associations it foregrounds emerged, circulated, and became normalized after the uprisings and years into the Syrian conflict. Furthermore, based on ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted with Syrian LGBT refugees in Istanbul during 2014 – 15, this article challenges the suitability of this figure as a knowledge production framework and suggests new research trajectories to approach, understand, and write Syrian queer and trans* histories beyond the queer/humanitarian visibility paradigm and the figure of the suffering Syrian gay refugee.*

KEY WORDS: *Gay; Humanitarian visibility; Media; Queer; Refugee; Syria; Violence*

In Latakia, Syria, before the 2011 uprisings, queer and trans* people often strolled along al-American Street in the city's center as they made their way to the popular queer neighborhoods that were and still are known throughout the country, especially among *al-Jaw,* the Syrian queer and trans* community.[1] On a pleasant summer day in

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[1] The term *Al-Jaw* is a Syrian gayspeak term that refers to everyone who understands themselves to be part of the real/ imagined queer and trans* community, though it primarily refers to gay men and trans* women, rather than lesbians and trans* men. When asking if someone is from the community (or not), it suffices to ask, is s/he *Jaw*? Saying that one is *Jaw* is the most generic way of saying one belongs to this community. In terms of other identity structures in this article, I use LGBT, queer, trans*, and gay to denote different things. I use LGBT to refer to the ways Syrian queer and trans* refugees are homogenized and spoken of by most media outlets, NGOs, governments, and asylum-humanitarian institutions. I employ "queer" in two senses. First, when used together with "humanitarian", I emphasize the regulatory function of queerness (See Jasbir Puar (2007) Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times (Durham, NC: Duke University Press). When talking about Syrian queer populations, I use "queer" not in an identitarian sense, but as that which escapes identity categories and their fixed

2009, I met Jaafar,[2] my best friend and primary interlocutor, to do precisely this. Like many *tantat*,[3] as members of the queer community are known within the community itself, Jaafar was wearing his usual light makeup; the details of where the makeup was applied were difficult to discern, but the overall impression of being made up was there. This was not the first or the last time he would wear light makeup out in Latakia, nor was it the first or the last time that we stroll along the street with the gist of femininity, a specific type of stroll that is called a *tarra* in Syrian gayspeak.

All along al-American Street are the city's "cool" hangouts: the restaurants, cafes, and party spaces that attract the younger generation to the area.[4] The neighborhood is mostly populated by Christians, whom many Syrians perceive as being among the most "liberal" of the country's religious groups. Although queers do not necessarily hang out much there, some live around the area, and one often has to pass by to reach the usual queer and trans* hangouts in the 8th of Azar Street or al-Courniche el-Gharbi, Latakia's most well-known and largest queer meeting point.

As we entered al-American Street, we saw an old clothing shop that we knew well. It had always looked shabby, dusty, and worn-out, one of those shops that remain open to keep their owners entertained, not because they are actually selling anything. On summer days, the owner would sit outside on one of the small old hay chairs common in Syria. He would mostly people-watch and "fight the flies buzzing around his face," as we say. Jaafar and I walked past the shop in the middle of the street, not

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narratives and structures. In this usage, I follow Eve Sedgwick's classic definition of "queer" as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's … sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically." See E. S. Kosofosky (1993) *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 8. While "queer" has come to be related predominantly to sexuality, trans* with an asterisk encompasses a wide array of being gender non-conforming/non-normative. As "a wild card in internet search lingo," the asterisk keeps open the elements and possibilities of what "trans" can refer to beyond fixed gender identity categories (see Katy Steinmetz (2018) The Oxford English Dictionary Added 'Trans*,' Here Is What The Label Means, *Time.com*, April 3, accessed November 30, 2019). As Jack Halberstam explains, the asterisk is used to "open the term up to unfolding categories of being organized around but not confined to forms of gender variance … [t]he asterisk keeps any sense of knowing in advance what the meaning of this or that gender variant form may be … ". See Halberstam (2018) *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), p. 4. With that in mind, I use "queer and trans*" as open-ended signifiers to emphasize those elements of Syrian queer and trans* people's self-understanding, histories, and experiences that are either prior to their encounters with Western media obsession and the humanitarian-asylum complex or that are not seen as fitting or intelligible to mainstream LGBT frameworks. Although it also refers to lesbian women in this article, I use "gay" primarily to emphasize the hegemony of this identity category in representations of and discourses around Syrian LGBT refugees in general, whereby Syrian gay male refugees are posited as sufficiently representative of the entirety of the spectrum.

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all names used throughout this article, following their wish, are the interlocutors' real first names.

[3] *Tantat* is the word many queer and trans* people in Syria use to refer to those who consider themselves part of *al-Jaw*. *Tantat* is the Arabized plural of *tant*, a pejorative term used to refer to effeminate men; though, as Sofian Merabet rightfully remarks about the usage of the term in Beirut, effeminacy is not always a requirement to be called *tant*. See Sofian Merabet (2013) *Queer Beirut* (Austin: University of Texas Press), p. 251. The injurious word has been reclaimed historically by and is used in a non-pejorative way in Syrian queer and trans* communities. For more on the figure of the *tant* and the concept of *al-Jaw*, see F. Saleh (forthcoming 2020), Transgender as a Humanitarian Category: The Case of Syrian Queer and Gender Variant Refugees, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 7(1): 37–55.

[4] It is called al-American Street (pronounced al-Amerkan) after "an American-built Protestant School" found in that street. See F. Balance (2015) Latakia is Assad's Achilles Heel, *Washington Post*, September 23, available at: https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/latakia-is-assads-achilles-heel, accessed January 31, 2019.

on the sidewalk where the shop owner was sitting. He spotted the graceful femininity in our walk, as *tarra* dictates, looked at us, and mumbled something that ended in the loud question, "What is this so early in the morning?" It was a statement commonly used as a slur, clearly stating his being disgruntled at seeing us. He continued to mumble and we continued to walk. A few meters after we passed him, Jaafar stopped and got quite angry. He looked disdainfully in the direction of the man, but not directly at him; and started to address him, but through talking to me, "What the hell is your problem? You see us every goddamn day. Will you act surprised every time you see us?" Then, addressing me directly, he proceeded with his rant. "How do they act surprised every time they see us, although they see us every day?" With the daily, unapologetic presence and visibility of many queer and trans* people in public spaces in Latakia at the time, especially around that area, the shop owner's harassment and feigning of surprise was nothing short of infuriating.

Fast-forward six years. On September 29, 2015, *Time* published an article titled "Meet the LGBTI Refugees Who Are Fleeing Syria for the U.S."[5] It featured two gay male asylum seekers residing in Istanbul, Turkey: none other than Jaafar and our friend Hasan (another primary interlocutor). At that time, I was conducting fieldwork in Istanbul, where many of my Syrian friends and acquaintances from *al-Jaw* sought asylum, either by resettlement through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or by crossing the Aegean Sea to seek refuge in Europe. Jaafar was one of the few who decided to take the path less trodden by Syrians: applying for third-country resettlement and waiting for years before being placed. An American journalist had interviewed them after learning that they were going to be resettled to the US. The article itself was nothing special, proposing a very familiar and platitudinous narrative about two Syrian gay men escaping "oppression" in the indiscriminately homophobic East and seeking "liberation" in the gay-friendly and free West.[6] My interest in the article lies elsewhere, in a remark Jaafar made during the interview that reminded me of that day on al-American Street in 2009. In what appears to be a comment on the question of being "out" as "gay" in Syria, Jaafar said, "We could never

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[5] K. Ozebek (2015) Meet the LGBTI Refugees Who Are Fleeing Syria for the U.S. *Time.com*, September 29, available at: http://time.com/4048421/meet-the-lgbti-refugees-who-are-fleeing-syria-for-the-u-s/, accessed January 15, 2019.

[6] The emergence and consolidation of civilizational discourses around gay-friendly vs. homophobic countries, religions, and regions has been studied, analyzed, and theorized by an array of scholars as "Homonationalism" (See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*); "Gay Imperialism" (see Jin Haritaworn, Tamsila Tauqir, & Esra Erdem (2008) Gay Imperialism: Gender and Sexuality Discourse in the War on Terror, in Adi Kuntsman & Esperanza Miyake (eds.), *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/raciality,* pp. 71–95 (York: Raw Nerve Books)), and "the Gay International"(see Joseph Massad (2002) Re-Orienting Desire: The Gay International and the Arab World, *Public Culture* 14(2), pp. 361–385). Many queer migration scholars studying issues of asylum and refugeeness in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity critiqued the ways many Western, asylum-granting nations instrumentalize LGBT refugee issues to propagate and sustain these narratives of the civilized West vs. the homophobic rest in their foreign policy agendas and building an image of their nation-states as tolerant and free. See, for example, David A. B. Murray (2016) *Real Queer? Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Refugees in the Canadian Refugee Apparatus* (London: Rowman & Littlefield); Sima Shakhsari (2014) The Queer Time of Death: Temporality, Geopolitics, and Refugee Rights, *Sexualities* 7(8); and Killing Me Softly With Your Rights: Queer Death and the Politics of Rightful Killing, (2014) in: Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, & Silvia Posocco (eds) *Queer Necropolitics* (New York: Routledge); and Eithne Luibheid (2008) Queer/Migration: An Unruly Body of Scholarship, *GLQ* 14(2–3), pp. 169–190.

be out of the closet in Syria […] You can't tell people that you're gay and live a normal life."[7]

How did Jaafar's angry articulation of everyday visibility and his dismay at the shop owner's "surprise" at seeing "us all the time" change into language of the "closet," coming out, the "normal life," gayness, and being invisible? Jaafar's statement in 2009 clearly and affectively, in a moment of anger, emphasizes the quotidian visibility of queer and trans* people in public spaces as an organic constituency of the Syrian social fabric.[8] Seeing them should not count as a surprise. Yet, in the interview, Jaafar's language centralizes invisibility, the closet, and coming out—tropes of Western, normative gay life trajectories[9]—to describe his queer life in Syria prior to fleeing to Turkey.

Years after the Syrian uprisings of March 2011, it is safe to argue that the latter of these two statements will ring true for most readers: By the end of 2015, a discourse on *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* had already been consolidated, circulated, and normalized. In other words, I argue that Jaafar's latter remarks about suffering in hiding and invisibility had become normalized as some foundational truths[10] that purportedly explain, capture, and give a clear idea of what queer life must have been and is like in Syria, prior to and after the Syrian uprisings in 2011. As a population that was quite unknown and rather irrelevant to global humanitarian and LGBT politics prior to their emergence as subjects of humanitarian benevolence and Western media obsession, it is imperative to ask: How did Syrian queer and trans* people's lives, their histories, and the social, political, and war dynamics that shaped and transformed their queerness and trans*ness become mere variations of the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee*? How has the language of suffering, oppression, and invisibility in relation to Syrian queer and trans* populations become so hegemonic and mainstream? Under which conditions and through which frames have Syrian queer and trans* populations become visible and so easily knowable and intelligible? What conventions and norms are governing this visibility and how can they be challenged?

By asking these questions, I do not mean to claim that suffering, oppression, and invisibility are discursive ploys intended to sabotage some idealized image of a rainbow Syria that existed prior to the uprisings. Nor do I claim that stories of suffering and oppression are fabricated, untruthful, or inaccurate. Queer and trans* populations, like many other populations in Syria, suffer from intersecting systems of oppression and, at this historical juncture, from different warring factions and their ways of

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[7] Ozebek, "Meet the Syrian LGBTI Refugees."

[8] Salina Abaza, personal communication, September 2018.

[9] See Laurie Berg and Jenni Millbank (2009) Constructing the Personal Narratives of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Asylum Claimants, *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22(2), p. 206. For a classic and compelling account on the central role notions of the closet, invisibility, and coming out played in shaping modern Western sexual identities and politics, see Eve Swedgwick Kosovsky (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkley: University of California Press). For an excellent and now canonical critique of the closet/coming out paradigm, see Marlon B. Ross (2005) Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm in: *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

[10] My use of "foundational truth" is informed by the Butlerian-Foucauldian notion (see Judith Butler (1990) *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge), further elaborated by Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*, that homosexuality as a category that now describes an identifiable group of persons is primarily shaped by a discourse of in/visibility, the closet, and hiding as its defining characteristic and as foundational to the emergence of a modern homosexual identification, whose "inner truth" or silence must be broken for the identity to emerge.

governing and punishing queerness and gender non-conformity. It is my contention, however, that there has been a systematic investment in reducing queer lives, histories, and subcultures to easily shareable narratives of suffering, invisibility, and oppression that are less about conveying nuanced, personalized, and contextualized accounts of the Syrian queer and trans* refugees, and more about producing repetitions without any recognizable difference. In this dynamic, the questions asked, narrative techniques employed, and representations produced invest in making Syrian queer and trans* histories more palatable and intelligible to Western humanitarian efforts and asylum institutions—and by extension Western media and audiences—rather than reflective of the complex contexts and conditions that shape people's experiences of suffering and oppression. The problem thereby lies in how these representations craft both the narratives themselves *and* the associative framework through which further narratives *must* be produced. In other words, what is most dangerous about this institutionalization of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* figure is not the representation per se; rather, its ability to conceal its function as an associative framework that, through excessive repetition and circulation, normalizes and fixates associations between Syrian queer and trans* populations; a strictly-knit set of queer negative vocabulary/affects, such as suffering, pain, and invisibility; and a limited number of experiences, such as persecution, death, and refugeeness. Syrian queer and trans* people become intelligible only within the contours of such an associative framework and through *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* figure, whose very naming evokes very specific and now hegemonic narratives of suffering and death, which this article outlines, that must be repeated *ad infinitum* for Syrian queerness to become intelligible. Moreover, naming this figure has come to substitute for any real, contextual, and in-depth documentation and analysis of the historical, material, and socio-political conditions of queer and trans* life as well as the particularities of queer suffering in Syria prior to and during the ongoing conflict.

My conceptualization of the associative framework, and its resultant figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee,* draws on Judith Butler's reflections on *framing* and *recognizability* and Emil Edenborg's theorizations of visibility. In *Frames of War*, Butler argues that the frames through which we recognize others are "politically saturated … operations of power"[11] that "not only organize visual experience but also generate specific ontologies of the subject."[12] The recognition of certain subjects as *real* subjects is always premised on the historically contingent framing norms and conditions through which those very subjects become visible and recognizable as subjects in the first place.[13] According to Butler, recognizability itself hinges on very specific conventions that frame the ways subjects become knowable and recognizable. Similarly, this knowledge is predicated on both concealing the very function of those conventions as associative frameworks, and marginalizing other potential frameworks and ways of knowing/being as undesirable. It is through the active marginalization of other frames of knowledge production and paradigms of recognizability, coupled with the continuous circulation of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* figure, that the queer/humanitarian framework of visibility and the various associations it presumes have been enshrined and institutionalized. Following Emil Edenborg, I argue that the queer/humanitarian

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[11] Judith Butler (2009) *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* (London and New York: Verso), p. 1.
[12] Ibid., p. 3.
[13] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

framework has become the hegemonic "regime"[14] or "arrangement" of visibility for queer and trans* Syrians,[15] regulating "what can be seen, heard, and felt in the public sphere" and "render[ing] certain subjects visible, hypervisible or invisible, some voices hearable and others distorted, certain stories intelligible and others incomprehensible."[16] It is through the consolidation of the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* that the queer/humanitarian framework of visibility succeeds in replacing other frameworks and ensuring its global hegemony as the most legitimate and desirable paradigm for knowledge production on Syrian queer and trans* lives.

This article is a preliminary attempt at providing a partial genealogy of the conditions under which *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* as a figure emerged and the queer/humanitarian visibility paradigm gained momentum since the beginning of the Syrian uprisings in March 2011. When it comes to approaching the Syrian context in general, and the queer/humanitarian visibility of Syrian queer and trans* populations specifically, media, violence, and visibility become heavily intertwined and inseparable.[17] That said, my genealogical account primarily brings together analyses and makes connections between an array of discrete media representations that, despite emerging out of disparate political and social circumstances, resonate with one another and provide exemplary insights into the discourses and structures normalizing and instrumentalizing the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee*.

To that end, this article highlights the following events: the notorious Amina Arraf/Gay Girl in Damascus incident in June 2011; the atrocities Daesh committed against alleged gay men in 2014/2015;[18] and the UN Security Council's meeting on LGBT rights and Daesh in 2015. To intensify the reflections and analyses drawn from these three events, I briefly consider a journalistic piece—more precisely, an interview with a Syrian gay man—published in 2012. This piece, through its stark difference from the discourses perpetuated in the other events, offers a narrative of Syrian queer history and associative frameworks that are nuanced, dynamic, and exemplary of the many ways a narrative could escape the impasse and hegemonic grasp of suffering and death as the starting point of all knowledge production on Syrian queer and trans* histories and lives. Despite the centralization of media as the main actor in producing and maintaining queer/humanitarian visibility, my analyses and theorizations throughout the article are undergirded and informed by various auto-ethnographic encounters, personal experiences, and stories from my ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Syrian LGBT refugees in Istanbul between 2014 and 2015. Although I follow a linear trajectory in analyzing the media events between 2011 and 2015, this linearity is more incidental than intentional and is not to be misread for causality or a teleological narrative of the emergence of the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee*. As I read these events, I hope to establish new

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[14] Emil Edenborg (2019) Theorizing Visibility in Global Queer Politics, in Michael J. Bosia, Sandra M. McEvoy, and Momin Rahman (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Global LGBT and Sexual Diversity Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 9.

[15] See Emil Edenborg (2017) *Politics of Visibility and Belonging: From Russia's "Homosexual Propaganda" Laws to the Ukraine War* (New York: Routledge).

[16] Ibid., p. 40.

[17] See Donatella Della Ratta (2018) *Shooting a Revolution: Visual Media and Warfare in Syria* (London: Pluto Press).

[18] Daesh is the Arabic acronym of the terrorist group and so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

and unpredictable connections between them that emphasize their genealogical potential rather than temporal linearity. In the conclusion, I revisit the scene of the opening story and share a few collective ethnographic recollections of queer life in Syria by my interlocutors (many of which I personally share). These will be neither thick descriptions nor detailed narrations, but shall be terse and intense bits of *al-Jaw* history that suggest, rather than impose, different questions, trajectories, and methodologies to approach, do research on, and write about queer and trans* histories beyond the associative frameworks of queer/humanitarian visibility.

"A Gay Girl in Damascus," Queerness, and the Humanitarian Will to Help

The first few months of the Syrian uprisings, which started in March 2011, were still predominantly peaceful; none of the various factions of protestors had picked up arms yet, at least not until the end of the summer of 2011.[19] Of course, the uprisings did not make queer or trans* issues part of the agenda, an omission that did not go unnoticed by the American blogger Tom McMaster, who decided to bring queerness into the picture at such an early and formative stage of the peaceful uprisings. Known as the infamous Amina Arraf hoax, this international incident merits proper mentioning not only as a constitutive part of the emergence of queer/humanitarian visibility and, later, *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* figure, but also as prescient of the power dynamics that were to characterize the relationship between Syrian LGBT migrants/refugees and Western LGBT organizations, humanitarian institutions, and Western media for years to come. Moreover, it raises central questions about the ethics of representation and the conditions under which queer and trans* Syrians started to become visible.

Tom McMaster, a forty-year old white, heterosexual, married man from the US state of Georgia, created a blog called "A Gay Girl in Damascus"[20] to be able to participate in the protests and political upheavals that had begun in Syria.[21] Later claiming that he would not be heard or be able to participate in the debates online if he were to use his real name, Tom chose to use an online alias he created in 2006: Amina Abdallah Arraf. The Amina alias was a lesbian, half-American, half-Syrian, who reported on what was happening in the first few months of the uprising. McMaster's choice of a "gay girl" persona to blog about the Syrian uprisings is highly problematic, to say the least. His "gay girl" fantasy caters to a male-centered, sexist, and lesbophobic view of lesbian women, whereby a gender-conforming "lesbian" woman, as the fake photo he used for his blog suggests, will potentially be more palatable than other queer personas to both Syrian civil society actors and international audiences (how would "a butch lesbian in Damascus," "a gay guy in Damascus" or "a trans* girl in Damascus" have fared as a symbol of the Syrian uprisings, one might ask?). She first became an Internet sensation and gained global attention after Syrian regime forces allegedly

[19] Joseph Daher (2019) *Syria After the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 38-42.

[20] An archived copy of the blog is available here: www.minalhajratwala.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/damascusgaygirl.blogspot.com_.zip, accessed December 1, 2019.

[21] Melissa Bell and Elizabeth Flock (2011) 'A Gay Girl in Damascus' Comes Clean (June 12) *Washington Post*. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/a-gay-girl-in-damascus-comes-clean/2011/06/12/AGkyH0RH_story.html, accessed January 31, 2019.

arrested her in June 2011.[22] Reports of her arrest sparked the fury of Amina's Syrian, regional, and global followers, who went so far as to create a #FreeAmina campaign on Twitter and a Free Amina Arraf page on Facebook. Upon discovering the hoax, most of the criticism circulating online focused on how McMaster deceived people, exposed the Syrian queer and trans* communities to potential danger and unwanted online visibility, risked delegitimizing the uprisings, and prioritized his egoism and self-absorption over the lives and needs of an entire population revolting against a brutal regime.

While these critiques are important, my interest in the story lies in a different set of structural problems that this event indexes. First, this story typifies a recurrent problem that concerns practices of queer historicization and the production of queer and trans* narratives that become authoritative knowledge and history, regardless of—or precisely because of—the speaker, their language, audience, and how they use contexts, affects, and associations. In the example of Amina Arraf, we see a Western blogger, writing in excellent English, addressing very specific populations, and capitalizing successfully on the affective force of events such as uprisings for freedom and democracy. A white American, non-queer, non-Syrian male felt fully entitled to enter the Syrian political sphere of his own accord, create a hoax, and present it as an autobiographical segment not only of the modern political history of the Syrian uprisings, but also of the history of queerness in Syria as it emerges.

Second, we see a humanitarian-activist who, out of good will,[23] goes to extremes in order to help. The title of an NPR article released in 2011 perfectly sums up how this logic of humanitarian benevolence constantly justifies its own shortcomings when causing more harm than good: "something innocent … got out of hand."[24] Although he later apologized, Tom McMaster's statements are indicative of the collusion between this desire to "help"–to be humanitarian—and the emergence of specific lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities and narratives as objects of that desire, rather than as subjects that precede it. The purported arrest of Amina Arraf in Damascus is the peak of this specific dynamic, whereby extreme negativity functions as the moment in which Amina's sexual identity becomes important as a result of the affective shock of her being arrested in the midst of an uprising. Although her blog never suggests that her sexuality had anything to do with her arrest, it emerges in the consequent reports as a core component of her identity and as somehow indicative of a self-evident history of persecution and arrest of lesbian women in Syria that requires no further probing or nuance. This inadvertent intensification of her sexual identity as it relates to her Syrianness eclipses, or perhaps fully capitalizes on the fact that, much like other populations, discourses around lesbian communities, love, and subcultures were virtually non-existent or strictly limited to closed activist circles or online platforms.[25] Within such an affectively laden atmosphere as the first few months of the Syrian uprisings, and with the great readership and international solidarity McMaster's

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[22] For a detailed account with excellent commentary on the issue, see Duncan Fyfe (2016) The Disappearance of Amina Arraf, A Gay Girl in Damascus (Week of May 29). Available at: http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/headline-story/16738/amina-arraf-a-gay-girl-in-damascus-hoax/, accessed January 31, 2019.

[23] Eyder Peralta (2011) Man Behind Syrian Blogger Hoax: Something 'Innocent … Got Out Of Hand.' (June 13) Available at: http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2011/06/14/137148644/man-behind-syrian-blogger-hoax-something-innocent-got-out-of-hand, accessed January 31, 2019.

[24] Peralta, "Man Behind Syrian Blogger."

[25] At the time of the Amina Arraf incident, I could only think of queer feminist scholar-activist Razan Ghazzawi who used to write about women, gender, sexuality, and queerness in Syria on her personal blog prior to 2011.

blog had achieved by the time of Amina's alleged arrest in June 2011, the circulation of the shocking news of arresting a lesbian blogger in Syria substitutes for the need to know or understand legal context, cultural differences, and social configurations of sexuality and gender in Syria and creates an enduring association between sexual identity and persecution in an incident that was not even about sexuality.

Notwithstanding this event, it was still 2011. The violence and the concomitant global media attention toward the Syrian uprisings had not escalated on a massive scale, and Syrian queer and trans* people had not yet been marked as likely refugee populations. So, when did the discourses around Syrian queer and trans* populations *as* potential refugees begin to emerge? And what explains the lack of global, humanitarian discourses around homo- and transphobia in Syria prior to the uprisings and the Amina Arraf episode? In fact, even between the Amina Arraf incident in 2011 and 2013, few articles, reports, images, or videos exist that address or represent Syrian LGBT refugees, or queer and trans* issues in Syria in general. However, I did stumble upon a very important interview conducted with a Syrian gay "refugee" on the website Globalgayz.com, published in 2012. After years of following media reports and interviews with queer and trans* Syrians, I find this article indispensable to both witnessing and understanding the shifts that have taken place in representing and writing about queer life in Syria. Moreover, it allows for establishing a correlation between the material conditions in which the speaker is living and his ability to articulate a more nuanced narrative of his life as a gay man from Syria. Much can be gleaned about the early dynamics of flight and escape for queer and trans* Syrians and the change such dynamics have undergone in the following years.

The interviewee is Adad, a 34-year-old gay man from Syria. From the offset, the article informs the reader about Adad's current status after escaping from Syria: He is "living in Turkey temporarily until June 2012 when his visitor permit runs out. He will leave Turkey and then re-enter to renew his visa, or he will consider traveling on to another country in the Arab League where he can enter without a visa, such as Egypt, Jordan or Lebanon."[26] What is most striking about this introduction is the lack of reference to seeking asylum, applying for resettlement at the UNHCR, or any full-blown discourse of being a refugee or understanding oneself as a refugee, a word that is put in quotation marks in the article's title.[27] In this interview, conducted years before the so-called summer of migration in 2015 or the emergence of the UNHCR's third-country resettlement scheme as an important actor in the lives of Syrian LGBT refugees and asylum-seekers,[28] leaving and re-entering, at least to Adad, seemed like his only viable option. With little media coverage and no major discourses producing the Syrian gay refugee as the ultimate figure of suffering and oppression, Adad's narration of living as a gay man in Syria is nuanced, complex, and relatable. The stories, memories, and analyses of the many queer and trans* refugees I interviewed and lived with during my fieldwork, especially those who lived in or were part of the queer and

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[26] Richard Ammon (2012) Gay Life in Syria: An Interview with a Gay 'Refugee' (April). Available at: https://www.globalgayz.com/gay-life-in-syria-an-interview-with-a-gay-refugee/, accessed January 31, 2019.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Fadi Saleh (forthcoming 2020) Resettlement as Securitization: War, Humanitarianism, and the Production of Syrian LGBT Refugees, in Eithne Luibhéid and Karma Chavez (eds), *Queer and Trans Migrations: Dynamics of Illegalization, Detention, and Deportation* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press).

trans* circles in Syria in the years directly prior to 2011, strongly reflect Adad's nuanced narrative.

During my fieldwork, every get-together that took place away from the media, journalists, the UNHCR, Turkish authorities, and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) revolved around reminiscing and reflecting on how queerness, gender non-conformity, and sexuality by and large in Syria were lived, (dis)organized, rendered (in)visible, (de)regulated, or tacitly approved/ignored (a subject I revisit in the conclusion). In all of my interviews and discussions with my interlocutors, rather than understanding pain/suffering as the sole legitimate affect or vantage point through which to understand oneself or historicize, I found that oppression and suffering were only some of the multiple frameworks Syrian queer and trans* use to articulate their journeys and histories. Below, I argue that Adad's nuanced articulation of his flight story and of "gay" life offers a solid glimpse into these more contextual frameworks of approaching and understanding queerness in the Syrian context that many of my interlocutors, to varying degrees, reiterated:

> *[Adad] is currently a man without a country … not so much for his being gay but for trying to make a political statement of defiance toward the Assad regime … In Syria there is virtually no security for him even though most (not all) of his family are accepting of his sexual orientation … Adad observed that before the Syrian revolution started in March 2011 Syrian people were generally tolerant of homosexuality even while being homophobic. If you minded your own business and did not turn gay issues into political issues and did not make a public nuisance, people tended to leave you alone … Violent hate crimes were virtually unheard of in Syria; an honor killing of a gay family member has never happened in Adad's awareness … even after the revolution started the gay community seemed to be left alone and not specifically targeted as a moral or security risk, even as the government vilified the opposition forces as 'homosexual revolutionaries' needing to be put down.[29]*

In this interview, Adad emphasizes a running narrative that queer and trans* Syrians are well-aware of and constantly tell one another within *al-Jaw* prior to, and even during the uprisings: as long as they do not get involved in anti-regime political activities in the public sphere, their sexual practices could be tolerated—and this was true for various sexualities and sexual acts, not just for homosexuality. Scrutiny and oppression were never strictly about some clear-cut notions of sexuality and sexual identities, as the current narrative framework purports, but rather about political organizing, starting a non-governmental organization, or critiquing the government or the person of the president in any medium or form that is not sanctioned by the regime and its institutions. This form of governance, quite familiar to residents of Syria, has been theorized specifically as being related to the Syrian TV drama concept of *tanfis*: a permissible way to let off steam and critique the government and its institutions primarily through the highly-controlled medium of a TV series and other state-controlled venues.[30] However, the politics of *tanfis* do not solely apply to television drama or other

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[29] Ammon, "Gay Life in Syria."

[30] See, for example, Rebecca Joubin's monumental study of Syrian television Drama (2013), *The Politics of Love: Sexuality, Gender, and Marriage in Syrian Television Drama* (Plymouth: Lexington Books), pp. 8–12; see also Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution,* pp. 36–37.

controlled media. Such a strategy, I contend, extends into many other spheres of life in Syria, whereby a form of implicit tolerance is traded for the readiness not to politicize (sexuality and gender) in ways that challenge the regime's authority and power.

That is not to say that queer or trans* persons were not arrested randomly, harassed, or oppressed—Adad is not delusional about Syria and does not romanticize the social and political dynamics surrounding homosexuality. However, in his interview, Adad meticulously captures the paradoxical situation in which people of non-normative genders and sexualities find themselves: an implicit "tolerance" of homosexuality coupled with a structural sense of what one could call homophobia; a complex relation to one's family that is not solely characterized by violence and oppression; a relation to the state that is less defined by sexuality than by silence about politics; and a considerable visibility that is more quotidian than political.

In his description of the different nuances, Adad presents a discourse that later becomes both unimaginable and impermissible. It is a discourse that necessitates neither complete invisibility/negativity nor the absolute absence of positivity, complexity, or cultural and political specificities in order for the Syrian gay subject to be allowed to speak. His circumstances in 2012 were, of course, different: Seeking asylum at the UNHCR or crossing to Europe had not yet become thinkable possibilities; Syria had not received so much international attention; INGOs, asylum institutions, and activist groups had not started thinking of Syrian queer and trans* populations as refugees or asylum-seekers; and, most importantly, the violence had not escalated enough to warrant the attention of the rest of the world. Yet, Adad's narrative, along with the conditions of possibility that allowed for it to become utterable in the first place, slowly started to disappear and give way to new circumstances and a new narrative with the emergence of Daesh.

Queerness as Refugeeness: Daesh, Violence, and the Figure of the *Suffering Syrian Gay Refugee*

If the Amina Arraf incident succeeded in attracting local, regional, and global attention despite being a hoax, the plight of the men accused of engaging in *Liwat*[31] under Daesh ended in literal deaths that the perpetrators turned into media spectacles and uploaded to social media. The images and videos of Daesh militants hurling alleged gay men from high buildings, among other violent methods of execution, went viral and abruptly halted and overshadowed all other narratives and representations of Syrian queer suffering. Reminiscent of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, Daesh employed techniques of active staging and spectacle-making[32] that maximized the affective shock of its extremely violent methods of killing and "repulsively invite[d] the viewer to come and jump on stage as well",[33] thereby "render[ing the dead Syrian gay body] visible, shareable and 'likeable' for the sake of global circulation and consumption,"

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[31] *Liwat* is a pejorative term for anal penetration, often understood as referring to the sexual act between two men.

[32] In her excellent analysis of the Abu Ghraib incidents and production and circulations of its photos, Jasbir Puar argues that part of the reason why these photos were so sensational was the presence of an element of staging and "exaggerated theatricality." See Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 104. In a similar vein, Donatella Della Ratta offers a compelling analysis of Daesh's politics and techniques of visual media production. See Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, pp. 148–177.

[33] Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 4.

as Della Ratta reminds us in her ruminations on the intermingling of visuality and war-fare within the Syrian context.[34] Syria, argues Della Ratta, is "the first fully developed networked battleground … [where] the networks have granted the utmost visibility and shareability to the most extreme violence" in an endless process of continuous circulation.[35] Daesh's images and videos were the epitome of such a dynamic, whereby the affective shock of circulating such images elicited massive and unprecedented international attention through social media platforms and journalistic reporting. Their videos and images were widely circulated, and with each viewing gained in affectivity, whereby signs of death, suffering, and oppression "become sticky through repetition … [and] accumulate value."[36] The more these images and videos of suffering and death circulated on social networks, the more value they accrued[37] and the more affective and capable of "sticking to … [Syrian queer and trans*] bodies" [38] they became, turning into inseparable and essential properties of those bodies and their histories.

By reifying and normalizing this associative framework, the dead Syrian gay body is produced and fixed as a subject whose visibility is heavily[39] intertwined with violence, thereby fixing violence as the primary site for the production of Syrian queer histories. Or, as Della Ratta succinctly rearranges Henry Jenkin's motto, "*[i]f it's dead, it spreads.*"[40] This not only inscribes death and violence as a condition of possibility for the production and circulation of representations of "what gay life is like in Syria", but also describes the basic condition for Western humanitarian allocation of care and recognizability for Syrian queer and trans* populations. Prior to Daesh, there was little to no international interest in Syrian queer and trans* people; but the Daesh videos and the hyper-circulation of images of and writings about these atrocities engendered a highly abstracted image of the dead Syrian gay body, fully dissociating it from its actual spatio-temporal context and projecting this abstraction onto entire, eclectic queer and trans* populations with diverse histories and continually changing presents. It was precisely at the moment the gay Syrian body became disposable (dead), I argue, that it emerged as a fixed gay subject and an object of Western humanitarianism and care.[41] As Jasbir Puar observes, "[the] productive force of affect [in these images of violence] renders language impotent: by looking we experience all that we need to know."[42] Thus, "knowledge has been reduced to a mere matter of visibility" and the affective association of death with the Syrian gay body is what remains from the shock.[43]

[34] Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 3.

[35] Ibid., pp. 4–5.

[36] Sara Ahmed (2007) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York and London: Routledge), p. 91.

[37] Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 8.

[38] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 76.

[39] Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 157.

[40] Ibid., p. 3.

[41] In my conceptualization of death, violence, and the (presumably) cis-gay Syrian body, I build on C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn's (2013) reflections on death and trans bodies/people of color in "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife, in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, 2, (New York: Routledge), pp. 66–76. The authors argue that "the transgender body of color is the unruly body, which only in death can be transformed or translated into the service of state power" (p. 68) and that "it is in their death that poor and sex working trans people of color … suddenly matter" (p. 74).

[42] Jasbir Puar (2007) *Terrorist Assemblages*: Homonationalism in Queer Times (Durham, NH: Duke University Press), p. 109.

[43] Della Ratta, *Shooting a Revolution*, p. 195.

One of the most famous "results" of Daesh's assaults on men engaging in *Liwat* took place on August 24, 2015, when the United Nations Security Council held its first-ever meeting on LGBT rights, hosted by the US and Chilean ambassadors to the UN. Billed as a meeting on LGBT rights, the meeting focused specifically on LGBT rights *as they related to* Daesh. This was the first time the Security Council had discussed LGBT rights in general, and the plight of "gay" men under Daesh in specific. Two self-identified gay men were invited to speak at the meeting. One was from Iraq. The other, Subhi Nahas from Syria, was an acquaintance of mine. Many years have passed since the meeting in 2015, and little meaningful change has come of it regarding LGBT rights or queers under Daesh. As Scott Long acutely prophesied shortly after, the meeting was "at best … useless."[44] Contemporary reactions on social media alternated between complete disapproval, comments about its being untimely, critique regarding human rights priorities in Syria, the uselessness of such a meeting, and reflections on how the United States yet again was instrumentalizing the subject of LGBT rights in the Middle East. On a very personal level, I am much more interested in a different set of questions and critiques about what this meeting represents. First, the Security Council meeting was the first time that Syria and LGBT rights were discussed in the same context on such a high political stage. I consider this meeting very pivotal in the genealogy of the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee* and as a central event in the recent history of the meticulously-curated type of "visibility" accorded Syrian LGBTs. One even could say that this meeting marks the entry of Syrian queer and trans* populations into the global (read: Western) imaginary of what Syrian queerness and trans*ness "look" like. The testimonies of the Syrian speaker spurred the active production of the most enduring associative framework for representing Syrian queer and trans* populations and their histories/narratives: the interpellation of the Syrian queer subject through, first, the category of refugeeness and, second, through the abstraction and discursive, rather than actual, approximation of the experience of death. In terms of queerness *as* refugeeness, I contend that being a refugee has become the condition of possibility for the Syrian gay subject's queerness to be recognized by high-level groups such as the UN Security Council and, consequently, the rest of the world. In other words, there is a sense that Syrian gay men's sexuality, and by extension all queer and trans* Syrians, has come to signify, or became intelligible primarily through their status as refugees. Anything that pertains to their experience as queer or trans* prior to their becoming or outside of their being refugees is rendered irrelevant to their sexual and gender history. Syrian queer and trans* people who are rendered irrelevant to the global discourses around Syrian LGBTs include, but are not limited to: queer and trans* residents of the volatile, shifting space of what is imagined to be/ is called Syria; refugees in non-Western countries who did not head to Europe or apply for resettlement at the UNHCR; queer and trans* refugees who left Europe, gave up their refugee status there, and returned to Turkey or Lebanon; queer and trans* Syrians who never wanted to leave and never left Syria; Syrian queer and trans* migrants or tourists who have the privilege of mobility, and the list goes on.[45] Acknowledgement

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[44] Scott Long (2015) The UN Security Council Debates Gays and ISIS: Why This is a Bad Idea (August 23). Available at: https://paper-bird.net/2015/08/23/the-un-security-council-terrible-idea/, accessed January 31, 2019.

[45] These are all different assemblages of Syrian queer and trans* populations that I have encountered during my fieldwork and/or who are in my life in general.

of such narratives would not only destabilize the hegemonic associative frame of queerness as *only* refugeeness (and refugees who fled to the West, specifically), but would also force the humanitarian and media communities to critically consider their limited and projected narratives of suffering, oppression, and death as the only legitimate and permissible sources of knowledge. Ironically, these prevailing narratives negatively affect LGBT refugees themselves because it benefits them only to the extent that they are able to reproduce very specific suffering narratives that decision-makers deem acceptable.[46]

Secondly, one must understand the function of the meeting's speaking Syrian gay subject in the process of producing queer histories. Unlike Liisa Malkki's famous formulation, the gay refugee is not "depoliticize[d]", "dehistoriciz[ed]", "a mute victim,"[47] or "a victim whose judgment and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences."[48] Syrian LGBT refugees are expected to be loquacious, eloquent, capable of rationalizing their story and experiences, and ready to endlessly repeat certain narratives, histories, emotions, and experiences more than others in a self-subjectivating gesture and under strict conditions that a priori dictate what is utterable and in which form it should be uttered. In this way, the refugee ensures the inseparability of refugeeness from queerness from Syrianness. Such "confessional discourse," argues Wendy Brown, "not only regulates the confessor in the name of freeing her, as Foucault described that logic, but extends beyond the confessing individuals to constitute a regulatory truth about the identity group: Confessed truths are assembled and deployed as 'knowledge' about the group."[49] In a socio-political climate of what Brown aptly calls "compulsive discursivity,"[50] humanitarian value is extracted from the dead Syrian gay body (executed by Daesh) and articulated in intelligible discourse, circulated, repeated, and enforced to the extent of becoming an indispensable part of every Syrian queer or trans* person's *potential* experience.[51]

Through this humanitarian transaction, what "could have been" forecloses the diverse and more nuanced narratives of what "was" and renders these narratives undesirable to the humanitarian discourse of saving Syrian queers from Daesh. This is best exemplified by US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power's remark that "[b]oth [speakers] were marked for death for being gay"[52] and Subhi Nahas's statement that "[being hurled off a building and stoned to death] was to be my fate, too."[53] The declarations "both were marked for death" and "this was to be my fate, too," are obviously not relevant to the gay Syrian speaker's current situation: He never even lived

[46] See Saleh, "Resettlement as Securitization."
[47] Liisa Malkki (1996) Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization, *Cultural Anthropology* 11(3), p. 378.
[48] Ibid., p. 384.
[49] Wendy Brown (2005) *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 91.
[50] Ibid., p. 85.
[51] See Arthur Kleinman & Joan Kleinman (1997) The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times" in Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das, & Margaret Lock (eds.) *Social Suffering* , pp. 1–23 (Berkley: University of California Press).
[52] Ambassador Powers (2015) Making History: The First UN Security Council Meeting on LGBT Rights (June 25). Available at: https://medium.com/@AmbassadorPower/making-history-the-first-un-security-council-meeting-on-lgbt-rights-f0ec18d216b, accessed January 31, 2019.
[53] Michelle Nichols (2015) Gay men tell U.N. Security Council of being Islamic State targets (August 25), available at: https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-islamic-state-gay-idUKKCN0QT1XV20150825, accessed January 31, 2019.

under the rule of Daesh as he clarified in 2016 and was in the United States at the moment this utterance was made.[54] Yet, such utterances have become a productive framework that intently foregrounds the self-evidence of suffering under Daesh as sufficient for understanding Syrian queerness, past and present, and as a substitute for the vast, complex social and cultural configurations of non-normative genders and sexualities over the years and across the continuously shifting landscapes/borders of Syria. The circulation and citation of the "death was also going to be my fate" discourse preemptively associates future speaking gay Syrian subjects with death and produces them, by proximity to the figure of the dead gay Syrian, as always *potential* objects of death; whether the subject ever *had* experienced death, suffering, or oppression in Syria, and what material, socio-political, legal, economic, or other conditions caused these experiences, becomes irrelevant and inconsequential to their representation. This associative framework becomes akin to an "anticipatory temporality" and a preemptive technology of surveillance and control that a priori produces and regulates what is utterable, what can be visible, which subject positions are inhabitable, and which frameworks of queer historicization are permissible for Syrian queer and trans* populations, refugees or not.[55]

For the people I interviewed and with whom I spent time, even long after my official fieldwork ended in 2015, the need to produce evidence of physical violence, abuse, or concrete threats thereof has waned in importance over the years and been substituted by the ability to produce a coherent narrative of the fear of Daesh. There is no doubt that Daesh was and remains a source of immense fear, especially for those whose lives it directly affected. What becomes problematic is the active conflation of fear with what was/is and the substitution of fear for the need for any critical engagement with the vicissitudes of discourses around queerness and trans*ness in Syria over time. The intensification of fear and the resultant compulsive need among Syrian LGBT refugees to inhabit a subject position produced by the "Daesh-queerness-refugeeness-death" assemblage, even if they have never lived under or experienced violence at the hands of Daesh, begs for theorizations that expand the purview of "the morally legitimate suffering body."[56] This suffering body does not only include "suffering … recognized and responded to by looking at the biological body and … apprehended through medical and scientific techniques and rationalities"[57]or traumatized victims whose suffering can be measured through psychology and psychiatry,[58] but extends, as in the case of the UN Security Council meeting, to "victims" who eloquently claim injury by the same perpetrator from whom others have suffered. If one thinks of Nahas's statements as an appeal to an imagined, caring international community, then the stakes of not coherently reproducing the association dictated by the

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[54] Subhi Nahas's participation as a speaker at the UN Security Council was so hyped that Nahas himself, after so many articles claiming that he lived under and escaped Daesh, wrote a detailed post on his Facebook account emphasizing that he "never said [he] escaped ISIS while … in Syria" and that he "left Syrian in 2012, which means there was no ISIS at that time." Subhi Nahas (2016), Facebook post, accessed June 17, 2019.

[55] Lewis West (2014) Jasbir Puar and Regimes of Surviellance" (December 4). Available at: http://cosmologicsmagazine.com/jasbir-puar-regimes-of-surveillance/, accessed January 30, 2019.

[56] Miriam I. Ticktin (2011) *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France* (California: University of California Press), p. 3.

[57] Ticktin, *Casualties of Care*, p. 3.

[58] See Didier Fassin & Richard Rechtman (2009) *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood,* Rachel Gomme (trans) (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press).

meeting's topic, "Daesh and LGBT rights," are quite high: "Your eloquence or your life," as Lauren Berlant has succinctly put it.[59] For the Syrian gay refugee, it suffices to cite the fear of the potential past rather than the potential future, as fear often functions.[60] But one might ask, when does this kind of paranoid visibility—with its exclusive focus on Syrian queers' death through execution—"turn into a voyeuristic quasi-pornography?"[61] What happens to the humanitarian allocation of care and Western media attention when deaths of queer and trans* Syrians are no longer caught on camera by the perpetrators, but happen in the prisons of the Assad regime or other warring factions, or are related to the queer or trans* person's political opinions and religious sect rather than their sexuality or gender identity? Why is asking such questions that demand complexity and nuance—of narrative, affects, and experiences—posited as antithetical to queer Syrian refugeeness, a threat to its coherence? And finally, aside from the media and its obsession with specific narratives of Syrian queer and trans* suffering, humanitarianism and its unequal power dynamics, and the narratives, images, and videos of death by Daesh, through which other vintage points and frameworks do Syrian LGBT refugees and migrants remember, reflect on, and understand their eclectic experiences of living in Syria?

Conclusion

In this last section, I offer preliminary reflections on these questions in the form of ethnographic recurrent recollections from my fieldwork of queer and trans* visibility in Syria that is seen neither strictly through the lens of queer/humanitarian visibility frameworks nor is romanticized or detached from the challenging and sometimes grim situation for Syrian queer and trans* populations under the Assad regime (before and after 2011). These recollections concern queer and trans* Syrians' relation to being in public spaces in Syria and suggest necessary revisions of and deviations from the queer/humanitarian visibility frameworks that I mapped out in this article. Instead of taking persecution, death, and refugeeness as the primary sites of investigating and understanding Syrian queerness, focusing on the complexity and richness of queer and trans* visibility in public spaces—as one of the many facets of queer world-making practices in Syria—can open up fresh methodological approaches, suggest new research trajectories, and offer more nuanced and differentiated historical, political, and activist accounts of being queer or trans* in the Syrian context.

When remembering that 2009 day with Jaafar when his anger was verbalized into a reflection that would stay with me for years, he and I could not exactly remember where we were headed, though we agreed it might be have been Virus, an Internet café that queer and trans* Latakians heavily frequented. It was one of those closed public spaces that *al-Jaw* decided to appropriate, queer, and claim an unofficial right to safety in. Located in the middle of the city, on the busy 8th of Azar Street, this Internet café gained a reputation within *al-Jaw* nationwide as being a space in which queer and trans* people in Latakia could socialize, flirt with men, and surf gay dating websites without fear of repercussions. While one might argue that the Internet café in

[59] Berlant, Trauma and Ineloquence, p. 50.
[60] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 65.
[61] Tobias Kelly (2013) A Life Less Miserable, *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 3(1), p. 213.

Syria is not a public space per se, it is very important to mention that, in 2009, Internet café owners had to obtain the information of every user as it is shown on their national ID cards and write down the number of the computer this person was using to surf the web. Surveillance of this kind was part and parcel of our everyday online lives. Of course, Internet café owners and the State could access, retrieve, and know which websites we were visiting and trace our activities back to us very easily. That always made us wonder in *al-Jaw*. The State is neither gay-friendly nor has any interest in protecting or granting rights or freedoms to its queer and trans* populations, and State surveillance provides a clear path to persecuting the queer and trans* populations. Nevertheless, this population is granted relative safety—perhaps indirectly—by the café owners, so that the public Internet café lends itself to being appropriated and rendered into a famous and visible meeting point for queer and trans* people, not just from Latakia, but from across the country. How are we to understand this complex dynamic among rights, surveillance, visibility, and relative safety? What kind of queer history emerges if we move from the queer/humanitarian framework of "Syrian queer and trans* people are oppressed and destined for imminent death" to a different framework that asks "how did Syrian queer and trans* people appropriate Internet café culture, navigate State surveillance, and build steady alliances with some business owners"?

While Internet cafés are popular hangout spaces during the day, other indoor public spaces become a more favorable destination during the evening: Namely, shisha cafés, particularly those frequented by men only. Akin to, yet fully critical of the problematic conceptualization of the gay bar as "the quintessential space for gay identity and culture everywhere" and "the site of ubiquitous homecomings for gay men and lesbians around the world,"[62] shisha cafés in Syria prior to 2011 and, as many of my interlocutors reiterated, years into the conflict, were and remained the quintessential sites where a whole world of queer social and erotic subculture was formed. In shisha cafés, different shades of queer visibility were tacitly accepted and, I argue, constitutive of the hyper-masculine, mostly working-class, male-dominated environment, which was an environment fraught with cruising and flirting possibilities. With the relative absence of an open or closeted gay bar scene/culture in the big cities, working-class, men-only shisha cafés—as opposed to fancier, mixed gender ones—become more relevant and appropriate sites of approaching and understanding queer world-making practices, gendered sexual dynamics, and quotidian visibility in such public spaces. Much like Internet cafés, the way in which a certain shisha café gains a reputation as being queer and trans*-friendly is a long and meticulous process of testing and expanding the limits of visibility and acceptability within that space and slowly becoming an organic part of the atmosphere of the café, creating and sustaining familiarity with the café owners and its clientele, and spreading the word within *al-Jaw* about this newly appropriated space. How can we understand and theorize the unapologetic visibility of the *tantat* in the context of a potentially hostile space characterized by an atmosphere of hyper-masculinity, gendered power dynamics, yet tacitly welcoming business owners and, with time, customers? How can we move from projecting the assumption of the universality or the relevance of the Stonewall bar experience, and gay bar culture in general, to exploring other spaces and settings as more viable sites for understanding

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[62] Martin F. Manalansan ([2003](#)) *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 3.

queer world-making and navigating oppressive social structures in different, non-Western contexts? What would a class perspective on gender and sexuality in public spaces tell us about queerness and shisha cafés in Syria?

Beyond queer visibility in closed public spaces, queer and trans* populations in Syria also claimed many open public spaces as their own. Over the decades, these spaces have become landmarks well-known to queer and trans* people in Syria, if not openly known outside of the community. In fact, learning about and being part of these public spaces are essential to one's initiation into and becoming part of *al-Jaw*. While a full-fledged mapping of queer urban public spaces in Syria is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to mention one place that has been fundamental to identity and community formation for many of the queer and trans* Syrians now in the Diaspora. The most recurrent name and one of the most enduring public spaces in many Syrian queer and trans* refugees' and migrants' queer collective memory is al Sha'lan Street in Damascus, a popular meeting point and shopping street in the country's capital where queer and trans* populations were quite remarkably and unapologetically visible in that often-crowded public space. Amid harassment, stares, and the presence of the police at times, *tantat* taking a *tarra* down the street, meeting and socializing in groups, for sex work, and cruising for men who were out looking for sex were some of the activities that were part and parcel of everyday visibility in al Sha'lan Street.

Whether in al Sha'lan Street, famous queer areas in other big cities, a shisha café, or a public Internet café, queer and trans* populations face state surveillance, police harassment, and social oppression and pressure as part of their daily experiences. However, unlike the queer/humanitarian narrative I have critiqued, their quotidian visibility is certainly not reducible to monolithic narratives of death, persecution, and suffering, nor do these as frameworks of knowledge production and historicization fully capture, explain, or do justice to the innovative ways Syrian queer and trans* populations were visible, appropriated public spaces, established well-connected queer and trans* communities nation-wide, and reconfigured certain spaces within the sometimes arbitrary, sometimes violently structural nature of the social, political, and legal dynamics in the Syrian context.

If anything, hegemonic queer/humanitarian narratives are predicated on the active production and sustenance of what historian George Chauncey called "the myth of invisibility,"[63] which posits that, "even if a gay world existed [prior to refugeeness, asylum in the West, and media visibility], it was kept invisible and thus remained difficult for isolated gay men to find."[64] Chauncey diagnoses this dilemma as a hegemonic conflation between persecution and invisibility—a conflation that, I argue, is now projected onto other parts of the world as a part of queer/humanitarian visibility discourses and politics that "misinterpret silence [toward police harassment] as acquiescence"[65] and render irrelevant any form of visibility that does not fit very specific frames/arrangements of visibility—or that misunderstands and mistranslates oppression, suffering, and persecution *as* invisibility that can only come out and enter the domain of recognizability in its capacity as an object of Western humanitarian efforts. As

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[63] George Chauncey (1994) *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books), p. 3.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., p. 5.

Chauncey et al. succinctly put it, "The determination of historians [LGBT activists, humanitarian organizations, media, asylum institutions] to document social hostility to homosexuality … has sometimes led them to obscure the richness of the gay culture suppressed."[66] Transposing this observation onto the context of asylum-humanitarian dynamics, the indispensable work of documenting human rights violations toward queer and trans* populations in Syria must continue and is essential for so many LGBT Syrians, but does it have to obscure other frames, narratives, and histories that do not fit the expected frameworks of how queer history must be told to be granted UN or human rights attention?

There is a need to go beyond notions of visibility that are strictly tied to the media and wedded to Western notions of humanitarian frameworks and visibility politics[67] and that do not take the "real subject"[68] or ethnographic research[69] into account. Indeed, beyond the political utility of visibility characteristic of Western discourses and the politicization of every representation of Syrian LGBT refugees within clear-cut binaries of freedom/oppression, suffering/joy, good/bad, or monolith/complexity, always valorizing the negative of these binaries, there is a lot to learn from Syrian queer and trans* histories of being in public space, their everyday visibility on the streets, and the complex dynamics that characterize their interactions with society and the State. By revisiting, documenting, and archiving queer world-making practices outside and beyond the figure of *the suffering Syrian gay refugee*, one might start to overcome the idea that experiencing pain/suffering/persecution and "having had a complex and rich queer life and subculture" are mutually exclusive,[70] which would allow for the myriad possibilities of other narratives and arrangements of Syrian queer and trans* visibility to emerge.

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[66] George Chauncey, Jr., Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus (1989) Introduction, in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming The Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Penguin Books), pp. 1-13.

[67] Both Emil Edenborg & Yener Bayramoglu, two scholars who recently provided compelling engagements with the concept, utility, and history of queer visibility, focus only on media visibility in their work. See Edenborg, *Politics of Visibility*; and Yener Bayramoglu (2018) *Queere (Un-)Sichtbarkeiten: Die Geschichte der queeren Repräsentationen in der türkischen und deutschen Boulevardpresse* [Queer (In)Visibilities: A History of Queer Representations in Turkish and German Tabloid Press] (Bielefeld: Transcript).

[68] Bayramoglu, *Queere (Un)Sichtbarkeiten*, p. 92.

[69] Edenborg, *Politics of Visibility*, p. 8.

[70] See Lauren Berlant (1999) The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics, in Austin Sarat & Thomas R. Kearns (eds.), *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law*, p. 78 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press).

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