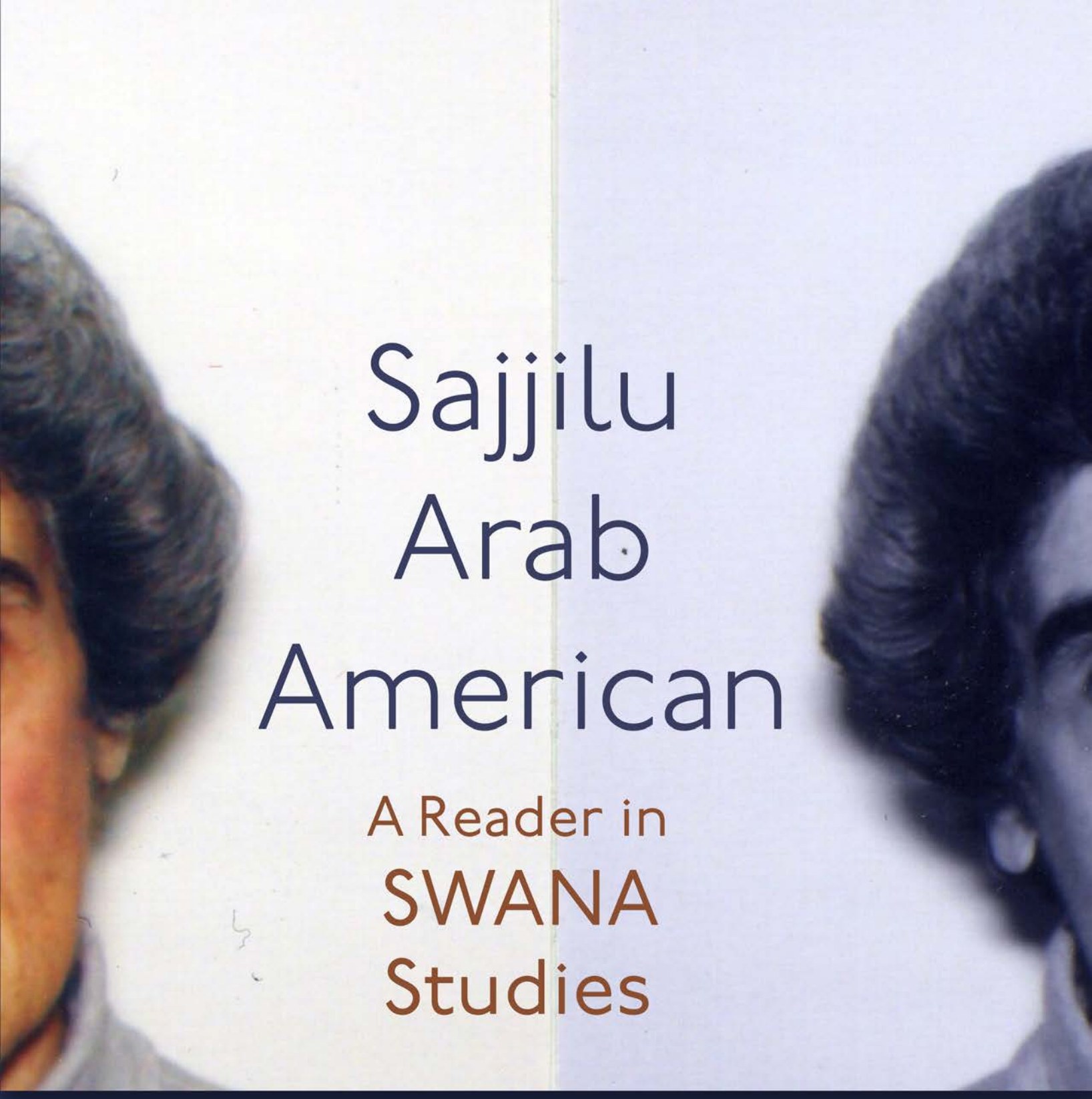

Sajjilu Arab American

A Reader in SWANA Studies

Edited by
Louise Cainkar
Pauline Homsi Vinson
Amira Jarmakani

Sajjilu Arab American

Critical Arab American Studies
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24

The Pulse of Queer Life

Arab Bodies in Gay Bars

meJdulene b. shomali

In June 2016, a Pakistani American security guard named Omar Mateen perpetrated a mass shooting at Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida. Mateen murdered forty-nine people and injured fifty-eight; his victims were mostly Latino men because it was the club's Latin night. At the same time mourners reeled from the violence inflicted on queer brown people by a brown man, many also grieved that violence was enacted in what many consider a safe space, the gay bar. This essay analyzes the discourses that circulated within queer communities about Mateen and about gay bars after the Pulse shooting in conjunction with Saleem Haddad's *Guapa* (2016), a novel about queer Arab life. The titular queer bar of the novel, Guapa, is central in the story and character development. *Guapa* follows twenty-four hours in the life of Rasa, a gay man living in an unnamed Arab country. On the day the novel's events take place, Rasa's lover, Taymour, will be married to a woman. The night before, Rasa's effeminate best friend Maj has been arrested in a police sting of known queer hangouts. The book opens with Rasa and Taymour discovered in bed together by Rasa's grandmother and follows Rasa as he copes with the fallout of the discovery, attends Taymour's wedding, and attempts to find and free Maj. The backdrop of the novel, the unnamed Arab country, is marked by some notable signifiers of the Arab Spring: protests occur in a central city square; as protests thin, the authoritarian regime maintains its stronghold; some pockets of the revolution take on increasingly Islamic fundamentalist agendas; and, finally, the protagonist experiences fatigue and disillusionment that the protests and sacrifices seem in vain. This tenuous post–Arab Spring political climate affects the queer subjects of the novel, in particular their inclusion/exclusion in the history and the future of the country.

There are compelling points of convergence between the fictional Guapa and the devastatingly real Pulse. In pairing Pulse and *Guapa*, I aim to discuss how gay bars produce and preclude safety for their subjects. The centrality of the gay bar is the topic of the first section. In the second section, I examine how masculinity and femininity are represented in anti-Arab, Islamophobic, and nationalist discourses and how those representations circumscribe the possibility of queer subjects, in particular queer women. In both Pulse and *Guapa*, the idea of a queer Arab and/or Muslim subject is seemingly impossible. In both, the primary bodies under discussion are bodies assigned male at birth and those that identify as men. I will suggest that this emphasis on men and masculinity is not incidental but rather a function of anti-Arab racism, Islamophobia, and Orientalism from without as well as of nationalist and authenticity politics from within. These discourses erase or obfuscate women and make women—though not femininity per se—marginal. In the third section, I discuss how security functions locally and globally in each case to make queer Arab and Muslim subjects impossible. In Pulse, Muslim queers are perceived as threats to US queer cultures via Islamophobia. In *Guapa*, Arab queers are perceived as inauthentic outsiders or threats to their ancestral cultures and to the future of the independent Arab nation. Specifically, Orientalist, Islamophobic, and anti-Arab discourses position

queer Arab and Muslim subjects as threats to queer US cultures, while Arab nationalist discourses mark queers as threats to the postcolonial Arab nation. In other words, queer Arabs and Muslims are not safe either in the United States or "at home."

Orientalism, Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, new Arab nationalisms, and authenticity politics are limiting discourses that circumscribe our capacity to see, imagine, and understand queer Arab and Muslim subjects. They limit the narratives available to us about queer Arab or Muslim life and position men as the central and most significant protagonists. Although this centralization is true of patriarchal cultures at large, the Orientalist and Islamophobic erasure of women makes a queer Arab or Muslim woman particularly unrepresentable. Limiting discourses affect not only narrations about queer Arab or Muslim life by noncommunity members but also those stories from within the community, such as in *Guapa*. I argue that a transnational framing is central to navigating these limiting discourses and understanding queer Arab characters. I juxtapose *Guapa* with coverage of Mateen and the Pulse shootings to demonstrate the utility of the transnational frame.

Though its central narrative unfolds in the unnamed Arab country, *Guapa* is written in English and was released in the United States and the United Kingdom. *Guapa*'s central character, Rasa, is back in the Arab country after college in the United States. As such, the production and content of the book fashion Rasa into a transnational Arab character, one whose queer coming-of-age takes place across and through contact with multiple cultural contexts. The events at Pulse are similarly transnational in scope: the club is in Orlando but on that night is dominated by Latinx queers, Puerto Ricans in particular. The shooter is a Pakistani American with several cultural and personal ties to Arab peoples and Muslim organizations.

I suggest the transnational brown spaces of Guapa and Pulse offer a unique frame from which to understand how Arab queer subjects are represented and formed. In her work on Arab American literature, Carol W. N. Fadda insists on the transnational character of Arab American literatures and identities, where the transnational "highlights the crucial ways the influences and factors shaping Arab American identities [lie] beyond the US nation-state" (Fadda-Conrey 2014, 8). I adopt Fadda's definition and insistence on the transnational because it captures the means by which Arab and Arab American subjects and texts are mutually constitutive and mutually constituted by discourses that circulate in the United States, the United Kingdom, Arab nations, and elsewhere. Looking toward transnational circuits allows queer subjects to articulate their experiences and emerge despite limiting discourses such as Orientalism and Islamophobia. I turn now to the points of convergence between *Guapa* and the Pulse shooting.

"I Want Take You to a Gay Bar"

After Rasa and Maj are reunited, they plan to hit the streets to protest.[1] But first they stop at the underground queer bar in the novel, Guapa. By way of its recurrence and role in the novel, Guapa functions as the central space from which queer characters understand and enact their identities and their revolutionary politics. The revolution of the novel, sexual and otherwise, unfolds in Guapa. At the same time, the state attempts to regulate and discipline its revolutionary queer subjects by raiding the bar in the hours just prior to the novel's opening scene. In many ways, then, the book begins and ends in the bar.

In the aftermath of the Pulse shooting, queer folks went online to mourn. One facet of this grief centered on the gay bar. Even though gay bars have been experiencing a national decline, the Pulse shooting was narrated as the experience of violence in an alleged space of acceptance and safety (Frohman 2016; Lopez 2016). On social media platforms, people posted about their first gay bars (Sykes 2016). They reminisced about the scenes of life in gay clubs, about the freedom gay bars afford life in general (*Guardian* Readers 2016). The gay bar emerged as a physical space and an archive of feeling for personal and national LGBT history in the United States (Cvetkovich

1. The section title comes from Detroit EDM band Electric Six's bizarre and political party anthem "Gay Bar" (2003).

2003). The gay bar was not only the scene of many individual comings-of-age but also the story of a national arrival at gay identity.

Guapa works similarly. Haddad paints Guapa as an oasis for queer love and expression. Guapa is the only public place where Rasa is free to love Taymour and Maj is free to perform femininity without being penalized (Haddad 2016, 128–31).[2] In other scenes of the book, Maj's feminine performances are immediately met with violence. For example, during Rasa and Maj's first meeting, Maj is accosted by a group of schoolboys for being beautiful "like a girl" (43). Whereas the Arab nation where the novel is set remains unnamed, the bar Guapa is also the book's title. The anonymity of the nation and the specificity of the bar decenter the national context and highlight instead sexual spaces as sites of meaning making in the novel.

Thus, in *Guapa* and in the United States, the gay bar is imagined as a safe space for queer subject formation. The bar's centrality to queer identity and culture is evident in queer coming-of-age literatures—for example, the canonical *Stone Butch Blues* (Feinberg 1993)—as well as in the responses to the Pulse shooting cited earlier. Maj and Rasa punctuate their days with visits to Guapa; the bar houses the best version of their intimate lives. The notion of queer bars as significant and safe spaces persists despite the violence that occurs in US gay bars and in *Guapa*. One of the most famous gay bars in the United States, Stonewall, was the object of police surveillance, violence, and harassment before it became a symbol of gay liberation. Guapa itself is subject to raids within the space of the novel (281). The violence visited upon gay bars by state and nonstate actors forces us to ask some questions: For whom is the bar safe, and what are the patrons safe from? I am particularly interested in what safety or welcome is available for queer Arab and Muslim subjects in both the US gay bar imaginary as told by the discourses around Pulse and in the imagined Guapa. What it looks like to be Arab and queer is discussed in the next section.

2. Subsequent citations to *Guapa* give page numbers only.

Desperately Seeking Sawsan

It is difficult to locate explicit representations of Arab or Muslim LGBT life in the United States or elsewhere.[3] This is in part due to the fact that LGBT identities are new even in the West. Theorists of sexuality in Arab and Middle East studies also contend that Western identity categories are inappropriate to Arab subjects, who may exchange and participate in same-sex practices but do not attach those practices to categorical identities such as gay or lesbian (Amireh 2010; Baron and Pursley 2013). In these communities, a richer archive of nonnormative sexuality can be located by thinking against identity and looking instead for desire and deviance (Arondekar 2009; Gopinath 2005; Shah 2011; Shomali 2019). At the same time, some Arab and Muslim subjects *do* adopt the language and identities under the LGBT spectrum. Over the past several years, there has been a small uptick in novels that feature or include gay Arab and Muslim characters.[4] Anglophone novels include Haddad's *Guapa*; Hasan Namir's *God in Pink* (2015); Karim Dimechkie's *Lifted by the Great Nothing* (2015); Alia Younis's *The Night Counter* (2009); Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaids* (1998) and *The Angel of History* (2016); and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008). Of these texts, only Jarrar's features a queer woman in any depth—namely, the bisexual protagonist, Nidali. *Guapa* briefly includes a lesbian character, Nora. What accounts for this emphasis on queer men and the scarcity of queer women? In a

3. Although I want to recognize the capaciousness and danger of pairing Arab and Muslim, many of the discourses that circulate about these communities do not. Thus, the framing of Arab queerness in Arab and American texts is affected by the same discourses that frame Mateen's actions at Pulse, though he is not Arab but rather Pakistani American and Muslim. The impact of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism are mutually constitutive of Arab and Muslim experiences and are explored here as such.

4. Some Arabic-language texts explicitly center queer or LGBT characters, and, of them, three (that I am aware of) concern women primarily. Although it's not within the scope of this essay to exhaust all LBGTQ Arab or Muslim work, Orientalist and Islamophobic discourses translate in many languages, and I would tentatively suggest that many of the trends I describe here also occur across texts.

survey of these texts, a handful of conventions and repeating tropes emerged. They include:

1. Write about men.
2. Write about men who love femininity but not women.
3. Write about feminine men and male femininity and men in drag.
4. Write about hypermasculine men who can't bear the stigma.
5. Write about all the tenderness of hypermasculine men when they finally have sex with other men.
6. Write about men who are revolutionaries in the bed and the *balad*.[5]
7. Write about dysfunctional family dynamics, particularly with parents.
8. Write about Islam and queer Muslim men.
9. Write about beards.
10. Write about blowjobs.
11. Write about anal sex.
12. Write about being caught.
13. Write about prurient sex in dark alleys, cabs, and behind closed doors.
14. Write about men marrying women but having same-sex lovers on the side.
15. Write about masculine women and chain smokers.
16. Don't write about feminine women.
17. Don't write about women.
18. Definitely write about blowjobs.

This list, tongue-in-cheek though it is, reminds us of the several limiting discourses for Arab and Muslim subjects. First, Orientalism produces hypermasculine, oversexed men and pliant, quiet, veiled women (Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber 2011). Second, anti-Arab sentiment in the United States and the West, particularly after September 11, 2001 (9/11), produces Arab subjects as hypersexual and seemingly queer insofar as their acts of aggression are read through a lens of repression (Puar 2007; Puar and Rai 2002). In this discourse, queer women can't exist, and queer men are necessarily hypermasculine to make up for their homosexuality. It is useful to recall here the sexual torture inflicted on prisoners at Abu Ghraib, the curious threats to sodomize Bin Laden when he was finally captured, and the accusations against Mateen as a frustrated homosexual engaging in vengeance at Pulse (Freccero 2002; Rao 2016; Tétreault 2006). Third, writers and artists of Arab or Muslim descent must contend with internal tropes around authenticity and identity that often designate nonnormative desire as antithetical to their cultures (Naber 2012).

Thus, the only lexicon that exists is one where queer men must emerge and reckon with their "cultural" repression in hypersexual and hypervisible ways. The bind of Orientalism and authenticity accounts for the proliferation of texts featuring queer Arab or Muslim men with relatively similar narrative arcs and for the scarcity of texts featuring queer women. Where the dominant representation of Arab and Muslim women is first about silence and repression by Arab and Muslim men, their available narratives circle not around their own sexuality, per se, but around their rejection of their sexist Arab or Muslim cultures at large. Of course, lesbianism would be an excellent way to achieve this! However, in both cases, the root of the repression is not men at large but Arab and Muslim men in particular in their exquisitely patriarchal Arab or Muslim culture. Arab and Muslim men and women are tasked thus with disregarding Arab or Muslim masculinity; for men, this disregard manifests as the ultimate rejection of masculinity—homosexuality. Women reorient to become the object of a white or Western male gaze rather than an Arab or Muslim one. This is why so many scenes of Arab and Muslim queer men feature sex explicitly, while the dominant trope for women is unveiling. As such, the space of representation between Orientalism, anti-Arab racism, and internal bids for cultural authenticity creates a horizon of impossibility for nonnormative subjects.

How does all this connect to Pulse? After the attack, many gay men in Orlando held that Mateen was himself gay and acting out of some mixture of resentment, repression, and general instability. He was upset that he wasn't more attractive to gay men in Orlando, in particular gay

5. *Balad* is an Arabic word for "country."

Latino men (Rao 2016). Some queer folks came forward to suggest they had seen him on Grindr and in the club itself (*Vice* 2016). Meanwhile, the FBI adamantly insisted that "no evidence" supported the theory of Mateen's nonnormative sexuality (Hennesey-Fiske 2016). Mateen's widow, Noor Salman, was put on trial in March 2018 for aiding and abetting the attack. In Salman's trial, Mateen was configured as a monster, abuser, and philanderer. Salman's defense portrayed her as a "woman of below average intelligence" who was incredibly susceptible to suggestion (Levenson et al. 2018). Salman remained silent during the trial, choosing not to testify in her own defense. Though her defense attorneys argued that the prosecution of her was an example of gendered Islamophobia, their own characterization of her relied on stereotyping Muslim and Arab women as oppressed and suffering—women in need of saving. According to her lawyers, she was basically too stupid and too disrespected by her husband to have ever been in on the attack (Jeltsen 2018). Based on these defenses, Salman was acquitted. Most evident in Mateen's and Salman's combined cases are two of the most dominant gender stereotypes for portraying Arab and/or Muslim subjects—the violent and repressive Muslim man, and the abused and silenced Muslim woman.

The reality of Mateen's sexual practices matter very little in the narratives produced about him. Multiple discourses proliferated, including the one Mateen set forward, in which he claimed the attack was a response to US imperial violence in the Middle East and North Africa region and attributed that violence to multiple Islamic fundamentalist groups (Visser and Couwels 2016). US responses to Mateen's attack were predictable: Islamophobes marshaled the violence in service of Muslim surveillance and stricter immigration policy; Muslim communities denounced him and often the homophobia implied in his actions; some feminist and queer communities urged the public to understand his actions through the lens of toxic masculinity or to resist Islamophobia. A small handful spoke about queer Arabs and Muslims as parties affected by the events. The strains that emerged suggested that there were good Muslims, and there was Mateen. There were queers, and there were Muslims. Naturally, these responses were not mutually exclusive—certainly some queers were Islamophobic, and some Muslims and Arabs defended homophobia, and so on. Ultimately, what animated Mateen was the figure of the "monster, terrorist, fag," one explicitly racialized into an Arab Muslim monolith (Puar and Rai 2002). The nuances of Mateen's actual identity were insignificant to US representations of him; he was simply a terrorist. Indeed, the trope of the "monster, terrorist, fag" collapses all nuance of identity or even factual aspects thereof—the trope overrides Mateen's non-Arab and non-Middle Eastern background, overrides his "real" or "alleged" sex life, and contributes instead to the neo-Orientalist repertory of images about Arabs, Islam, and the Middle East.

In *Guapa*, for Rasa and Maj, on the forefront of their nation's revolution, faggotry is the scene of terror. The novel demonstrates this: Rasa and Taymour are discovered in bed together by Rasa's grandmother, and Rasa spends the day agonizing over her response; Guapa is raided in an attempt to strengthen the state's chokehold on the revolution; when Rasa tries to pick up Maj at the police station and is interrogated by officers, they scream at him for crossing his legs and call him "she" (136–37). His feminization is an acknowledgment of his queerness. Rasa's compliance with the guards and his fear are contrasted with Maj's resistance and bravery (138–39). Maj has and always will perform femininity; he has and always will participate in the protests (122, 282–83). The subject of policing is always Maj—the gender nonconformant, the drag queen, the effeminate man. His femininity is lauded and exalted next to Rasa's seeming masculine compliance, especially during the scene of Rasa's interrogation. It is precisely because Maj's femininity exposes him to violence that he is narrated by Rasa as a revolutionary subject. Nora—the masculine lesbian, founder, and manager of Guapa—is never afforded these radical overtures or significance, despite her responsibility in creating Guapa in the first place. She is a marginal character, mentioned in only a few scenes of the novel.

Despite this oversight, Haddad's treatment of gender and sexual nonconformity achieves some remarkable points. By placing Maj and Rasa at the center of the uprising, Haddad affirms an understanding of nonnormative genders and sexualities as central to the revolutionary context of the novel. Centering queer subjects works against Orientalist framings that route Arab and Muslim

unrest through allegedly repressed sexuality. Through Rasa and Maj's harassment and experiences of violence, the novel explores the homophobia that is indeed present in the Arab world. Against the flat representations of Arabs and Muslims in the Pulse coverage, *Guapa* upholds the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of queer Arab or Muslim subjects. But that subject—even that impossible subject—is a man.

Whither the Hummusexual?

The impossibility of the queer Arab or Muslim subject is further configured through the entangled languages of safety and security. Mateen, a security guard twice investigated by the FBI, attacks a "safe space," a US gay bar on Latin night. What does security entail in this context? In the United States, gay bars became safe from state-sponsored violence through processes of privatization, territorialization, and organization that ultimately reified white men as paradigmatic gay subjects (Hanhardt 2013). In more direct terms, as LGBT people organized in the United States, safety was achieved by designating some spaces as gay safe spaces, privatizing those spaces, and dissociating them from other "derelict" communities (poor, of color). As noted earlier, prior to the 1970s and 1980s, gay bars were focal points of police violence. Thus, the "safety" of the gay bar is predicated on the notion of an ideal gay citizen subject—one who is not criminal, not in the streets, not "un-American" in any way aside from homosexuality; this subject is not safe from homonormativity, racism, or classism per se. The gay safe space is simply spatially separated from the usual policing forces.

At the national level, security is a heteronormative tool of empire (Jarmakani 2015). The framework of US exceptionalism invokes the United States as free of homophobia compared to the locations it colonizes and invades. Simultaneously, communities of color in the United States are understood as exceptionally homophobic compared to white communities. At the national level, security also entails security from violence. If the gay bar imagines a subject safe from police violence, and the state imagines a citizen body secure from outsider attacks, Mateen punctures both safety and security in the United States. Mateen's brown skin and association with Islam consolidate his homophobia, born in the United States, as somehow *outside* the United States.[6] He obfuscates the violence of the heteronormative US state, often targeted at brown, Black, and Indigenous bodies, very much like those dancing at Pulse that night. Rather than locating the violence within the colonial and racist implementations of safety that create niche gay spaces and even "nicher" gay Latin spaces, we locate violence in the "monster, terrorist, fag" (Kalish and Shane 2016). This further frees the US normative or homonormative subject to respond with violence or benevolence.

The figure of the "monster, terrorist, fag" codifies Orientalism, anti-Arab racism, and Islamophobia to preclude Arab or Muslim subjects from visibility or inclusion in the LGBTQ community in the United States. Queer Arab or Muslims are at best invisible. More likely, Arab or Muslim subjects must renounce homophobia in their communities, become ambassadors against homophobia, or repeatedly affirm the existence of queers in those communities. Most realistically, however, Arab and Muslim subjects experience violence in defense of the "free" US subject, both domestically and transnationally. These options leave very few moments of queer Arab or Muslim possibility. Instead, as the coverage of Mateen's act indicated and our current political climate corroborates, safety and security in the United States eradicate Arab and Muslim bodies.

In *Guapa*, Maj and Rasa are policed not only because of their homosexuality but also because their bodies threaten the security of the Arab nation in the novel (284). That security threat is mutually constituted by their presence in the revolution and by Maj's obvious homosexuality as an effeminate character. The security of the "traditional or authentic" Arab nation seeks to eradicate queerness. The revolution imagined by the unnamed Arab state in the novel targets queerness as incompatible with its past and future national image. Although *Guapa* is fictional, the pattern of cracking down on gendered and sexual nonnormativity in the pursuit of an authentic

6. All evidence suggests that Mateen was not aware Pulse was a gay nightclub when he attacked it, calling into question the idea that the attack was rooted in homophobia. See Greenwald and Hussein 2018.

national identity is rooted in historical precedent—for example, Egyptian police crackdowns on known queer and gay spaces in 2001, 2014, and 2017 and Egypt's conversations regarding the criminalization of homosexuality. In *Guapa*, the gay bar is "safe" only insofar as it holds capacity for the expression of queer desire. It is not "safe" from state violence, as the contemporary US gay bar purports to be. As such, the queer Arab subject is neither secure nor safe in the Arab local and national contexts.

To conclude, I suggest that understanding Pulse and *Guapa* necessitates a transnational frame for thinking about queer Arab and Muslim subjects, no matter where they are geographically located, because Orientalist and neo-Orientalist frames and internal bids for authenticity affect the representation of queer transnational Arab and Muslim subjects. In Pulse and *Guapa*, we see the bar reoccur. The gay bar both produces and precludes queer Arab and Muslim subjects, particularly through discourses of safety.

Guapa's attempt to center Maj and Rasa and to center the bar rather than the nation is perhaps the way that Haddad imagines queer subjects are capable of eluding state violence and attaining a different kind of community organization. Like Pulse, Haddad's Guapa is a transnational space. Guapa's patrons are ex-pats and pats, men and women, queers and their kin. They are of the mainstream and simultaneously of its undercurrent, tugging the waters of the revolution in new directions. In a special issue of the journal *GLQ* devoted to considering Pulse, Eng Beng Lim (2018) imagines an "Orlando(s)cene" that resists the current political climate of the United States, recently presided over by Donald Trump. Lim articulates this vision of utopic queer nightlife by reflecting on the composition of Pulse that evening, where Mateen's victims and other attendees served as a testament to the multiple possible modes of engagement and queer visioning—that Pulse's transnational queer bodies of color constituted a corporeal response to white supremacy and toxic masculinity, that their presence and commitment to queer life in these distinctly dangerous times constituted not only a horizon of possibility but one of transformation. Indeed, this is the framing Haddad offers of Guapa. Guapa is threatened by the Arab nation because the gay bar questions the nation as the organizing entity.

Here we can return to the previous section's central question: Whither the hummusexual? Where does the queer Arab or Muslim subject exist? If a queer way forward for Muslim or Arab subjects exists, it is most likely in the transnational imaginary that Lim and Haddad articulate. At the same time, let us not forget about Nora from Guapa or the women who died at Pulse or the numerous queer Arab women and femmes whose stories seem impossibly foreclosed. The erasure of queer women and the fraught representations of queer men reveal the extent to which discourses about and by Arabs about what constitutes Arab culture are deeply informed by heteropatriarchy and heteronormativity. A breach in that horizon of impossibility is then possible only through feminist and queer challenges to it. Haddad's transnational Guapa and Lim's Orlando(s)cene will be radical spaces only if they resist imperial investments in the gendered and sexual enactments of Orientalism, Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and the politics of cultural authenticity.

If we bring Nora and her "army of lesbians" (273) to the foreground of Guapa as the center of its radical agenda, what new organizational and representational strategies might be revealed? If we study the women of Pulse, such as Brenda Lee Marquez McCool, a frequent visitor and Pulse club "mom" who shielded her own son during the shooting (Bloch, Hersher, and Domonoske 2016), what might we learn about love, care, and resilience? What stories of revolution and resistance do women and femmes live? How might we learn new modes of becoming from their stories? These questions, which foreground Arab women and femme-of-center subjects, will radically alter our vision of queer Arab subjectivity and transnational Arab politics.

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