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THE EGYPTIAN BLOGOSPHERE
POLICING GENDER AND SEXUALITY AND
THE CONSEQUENCES FOR QUEER EMANCIPATION

GRANT WALSH-HAINES



ABSTRACT

This work attempts to answer the following question: What do Egyptian blogs tell us about how queer liberation can be achieved in Egypt? Through qualitative research and content and discourse analysis, I explore queer blogs and attempt to untangle their meaning. I begin with a brief review of recent Egyptian economic history, focusing on metaphorical colonization and the policing of gender and sexuality. Also important for contextualizing of this study is a review of identity formation and national identity, as well as of recent issues surrounding censorship. In order to fully understand Egypt's contemporary political culture, we must also understand the ways and words that individuals use to describe their lives on the Internet. Evaluating colonization and imported modes of policing, censorship, identity formation, geographical location, and a stirring national narrative are all aspects of Egyptian political culture, but are rarely, if ever, discussed comprehensively. I hope to demystify the underground politico-cultural currents that exist in the queer Egyptian blogosphere. Through the process of reconciling political discourse with modern technology, in this instance blogging, I argue that subversive optimism, coupled with online activism, has the potential to challenge existing structures of heteronormativity. According to my findings, change hinges on challenging difficulties and disconnects between gay men's and lesbian women's experiences.

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DRIVING QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGIES

Queer individuals in Egypt experience a combination of silencing and suffocating factors: censorship, heteronormative discourse, religious and state-sanctioned law, and homophobic violence.¹ These problems are central to this body of work, which explores bloggers' interpretations of the structures that limit their expression of sexual orientation. I will emphasize the context-specific state of Egypt, in order to place blogs in a geographical reality. Because Egypt has recently experienced a dramatic increase in Internet access, queer individuals with increased online presence have the potential to end silence and work towards social equality, subversive optimism, collective action, community, and coalition building.

Liberation does not exist in real public Egyptian spaces. Queer individuals cannot identify openly as queer in Egypt. As a result, queer identity is expressed primarily online. Yet, if queerness is manifest primarily online, how and where do gays and lesbians get on the Internet? Is the movement of queer individuals online monitored? How does queer expression online create identity for Egyptian users? The answers to these questions aided in illuminating my central question: Why is liberation limited to Internet spaces, and how it is possible to manifest queer emancipation in Egypt? Simply, what are Egyptian bloggers saying about how queer social justice can be achieved? The following exploration and evidence from blogs suggest new insights into achieving queer social justice in Egypt. These questions validate multiple queer experiences, provoke often-silenced voices, and explicate queer realities for a scholarly audience.

In order to address the central issue in this article, to discuss the possibilities of queer empowerment, an exploration of Egypt's history and colonial legacy, must be addressed. I argue that both the literal and metaphorical colonization in Egypt have led to an increased level of censorship in this authoritarian state. I argue, briefly, that colonization has been a driving force in policing the Western concept of the private sphere, which was imported alongside English control. Egyptian censorship, then, acts as a literal and metaphorical roadblock for queer emancipation. Also, explicitly homophobic laws and homophobic violence function as another barricade and must be addressed in order

to begin a conversation about dismantling institutionalized homophobia. After addressing these perspectives, I offer a small sample of tangible Egyptian voices, listed in Table 1. Potential movement towards discovering liberating solutions is facilitated by validating the experiences of these queer bloggers.

Table 1: Blogs Accessed

Blog Name:	Address:	Geographical: Location:	Approximate Views:	Language:
Kareem's Diary	kareemazmy.blogspot.com	Egypt	172,000	Arabic
Diaries of a Lesbian Woman	emraamethlya.blogspot.com	Egypt	61,400	Arabic
The Egypt Blog	theegyptblog.blogspot.com	Egypt	4,300	Arabic & English
Always Others	www2kasber.blogspot.com	Egypt	3,000	Arabic

As a web-based ethnographer, I never interacted with online message boards, blog threads, or chat rooms. In order to avoid interference with information production in the blogosphere, I attempted to remain anonymous and invisible throughout the project. Synthesizing and analyzing blog text allowed me to explore what is important to bloggers. I imagined blog text as dialogue between authors, because bloggers share intimate thoughts, stories, and poetry and because blogging also allows for responses from other bloggers.² My primary method for evaluation was discourse analysis, although content and Internet-space analysis was also relevant (Bryman 2008). I also considered the importance and meanings of Internet page styles, images, and graphics, which added to blog conversations, creating a visual and virtual context for blog conversations.

Understanding blog text within a greater social structure aided in drawing contextually relevant conclusions (Tickner 2005). Queer perspectives within blog content added to the development of reflexivity in this project, which is “attentive [to] transnational work on sexual meaning” (Hemmings 2007). The varying queer perspectives of bloggers highlight the limitations of Western categorization, for instance, because these queer blog perspectives do not necessarily adopt Westernized identity labels.

Studying the Internet challenges traditional methodologies and information gathering. The blogs outlined in Table 1 are a small sampling

of Egyptian voices, which I have chosen based on my subjective perspectives about “what is important.” Initially, I chose these blogs based on accessibility and the topics discussed by each blogger. English language was a factor in my initial searches and served as an entry point into the Egyptian blogosphere. But, this starting point also began with the limits of Western categorization: Do I enter “Queer Arab” or “Lesbian Muslim” into search engines? Were these words used by the bloggers? I began to uncover a chain of links that quickly landed me a vast space of English and Arabic language blogs. In this piece, I translate some sections of Arabic language blogs. Although this requires further investigation in future studies, because I may misunderstand nuanced language and complex language use (e.g. idioms, sarcasm), I sought help in translation from colleagues when necessary.

My findings are limited, but work to include gay men’s and lesbian women’s blogs, as well as the multinational blog, *Bint el Nas*. It is impossible to know the true motivations, intentions, honesty, and specific geographical location of bloggers, simply because of both the nature of the medium and the varying interpretations of reality posted by bloggers (Warf and Vincent 2007). Viewing blog content as a set of subjective perspectives allows the reader to understand the strength of individual experiences and individual voices online and deeply understand the perspectives from which bloggers approach and interact with Internet spaces. Furthermore, the vastness of the Internet creates the “[feeling] that the experience is like trying to hit a target that not only continually moves but is in a constant state of metamorphosis” (Bryman 2008). Blog information is highly personal—overwhelmingly experienced as reading an intimate journal—but blogs are public forums that invite feedback and readership (Maratea 2008). Interestingly, all of the blogs included here avoid the use of names; the bloggers have all created their own pseudonyms for their own protection. I used the same pseudonyms throughout the project. In other words, I did not use any personal information that was not already on publically accessible web sites. This combination allows for grappling with deep intimacies and poetic moments that would not necessarily be observable in real Egyptian space or put individuals at risk. The use of digital ethnographic methodologies³ allowed me the opportunity to read and analyze conversations that I would not have had access to otherwise.

While conclusions cannot be drawn about all queer lived realities in Egypt based on this sample of blogs, the reader should be able to think about collective action and subversive optimism in new, contemporary, and needed ways.⁴ Finally, by focusing on Egypt as a geographically bound state, I illuminate geographically specific experiences of queer individuals in a limited space. With continued research, I aspire to include a broader range of voices from the Egyptian blogosphere. All too often, questions about queer individuals and lived realities are not asked, suggesting a greater cultural silence—one worth taking the time and energy to shatter and to replace with knowledge and liberation.

EGYPT'S HISTORY OF COLONIZATION

In order to limit this study within a bound geographical space, I now turn to Egypt's history of colonization. The purpose of this section is to elucidate Egypt's colonization process and connect it with contemporary modes of power and control. The import and export of cultural norms that resulted from colonization directly affect the policing of gender and sexuality in Egypt today. Specifically, Western modes of power and control have manifest in two ways: censorship online and the policing of bodies. I will address both of these themes in the following two sections.

Metaphorical colonization and the subsequent implementation of British social norms included heavily policing the private sphere. What I term “metaphorical colonization” refers not to the changing economic landscape and the dependence on exploited labor (literal colonization), rather the “complex intercultural interplay” between British colonizers and Egyptians (Puchala 2002). Contemporary cultural norms in Egypt have adopted and maintained, in part, European modes of power and control, in particular the tactics of police authorities.⁵

Police systems have shaped the development of social norms in Egypt in complex ways. The allowance of police to maintain control over private spheres under British imperial power evolved those norms with imported European methods. The implementation of Western modes of power and control on a broad scale created multi-layered changes to certain norms within the Egyptian state. One historically relevant example is that of the practices of Colonel Herbert Kitchener, who became the Inspector-General of the Egyptian police. He created a “comprehensive

system of English inspection...; the 'interior' of Egyptian village life was... to be brought under continuous supervision" (Mitchell 1991). Timothy Mitchell (1991, 127) claims that the importation of European power and control was and is still pervasive, adopted by Egyptian police, and infiltrates the private lives of Egyptians:

Colonizing Egypt, in the broad sense of the penetration of a new principle of order and technique of power, was never merely a question of introducing a new physical discipline or a new material order.... They were to operate in terms of a distinction between the physical body that could be counted, policed, supervised and made industrious, and an inner mental space within which the corresponding habits of obedience and industry were to be instilled....

This new type of Western authority seeped into the private sphere and became the new, pervasive mode of power and control. Specifically, one focus evolved into policing sexuality in new ways through the use of private inspectors. The policing of sexuality was associated with deeply embedded binaries dividing Western modernity and Egyptian backwardness.

Egypt's colonial legacy, in part, correlates to the conceptualization of imported queerness today. Imported modes of power and control in the private sphere relating to sexuality included the importation of Western homophobia; "gay and lesbian' and 'queer' become a closed circle, a performative iteration of inverse colonial logic" (Hemmings 2007). Egyptian discourse consistently pairs non-heterosexual terms with Western decadence, suggesting that any concept related to queerness is a colonial import, one that Egyptians, especially those with power and control, would rather expel than adopt. Because Egyptian discourse regarding policing bodies was influenced by European norms, the discourse, too, is a product of metaphorical colonization. In the blog *Queer Jihad*, author Faris Malik makes this connection: "While there has been a prejudice among Muslims against certain homosexual activities since the earliest times, homophobia as we know it today has arisen in Islam only since the 1800s, perhaps influenced by European colonialism."⁶ Colonization, according to Malik, is one explanation for current homophobia; therefore colonization must be a part of the discussion. Ultimately, this binary has impacted understandings of non-normative sexualities.

While colonization is not the sole explanation, it shaped the modern socio-political and economic landscape. Recent economic liberalization has also played a role in the perpetuation of the East/West binary, further exacerbating ideas pairing queer identities with Western or outsider status (Said 1994). Collectively, the trends of colonialism and economic liberalization ultimately paved the way for incorporating the Internet into the Egyptian economic sphere.⁷ Although colonization and economic liberalization did not cause the integration of the Internet into the Egyptian economic sphere, the two are related. I have argued here that policing and modes of power and control were a Western import that paralleled metaphorical colonization. In the next section, I address these concepts and their application on the newly emerging blogosphere in the form of censorship.

CENSORSHIP: A COLONIAL LEGACY IN EGYPT

With the increasing access to Internet technologies, governmental agencies worked to restrict certain web sites, and often succeeded (and continue to succeed) in maintaining censorship among Internet users. The history of metaphorical colonization in Egypt infiltrated the newly emerging Egyptian blogosphere. Throughout Egypt's colonial legacy, censorship was pervasive in policing the private lives of Egyptians. In similar fashion online censorship aims to police the private lives of individuals by limiting their expressions online. Today, anecdotal evidence and blogs dedicated to dismantling censorship in Egypt demonstrate the pervasiveness of censorship online.

Power and control are maintained in ways that reflect Egypt's colonial history. For instance, despite recent aggressive efforts to expand the Internet and the Egyptian economy, many users are curbed through "low tech methods' such as intimidation, legal harassment, detentions, and real-world surveillance of online dissidents" (Freedom House 2011). These methods resulted in the legal punishment of Internet users considered to be amoral or subversive, and, in some cases, resulted in the arrests of bloggers on charges of libel and defamation.⁸ New Egyptian legislation to police Internet users is vague and reprimands individuals for "damaging social peace, national unity, public order, and public values," with potential punishments ranging from fines and imprisonment

to the confiscation of equipment, according to OpenNet Initiative.⁹

Primarily, censoring Internet access perpetuates the East/West binary by limiting Egyptians' access to Western web sites. Governmental and legal structures, influenced by Islamic mores, shifted in favor of censoring Western ideas online, lest Western ideas infiltrate the masses through the Internet. Western ideas worth censoring, according to Egyptian standards influenced by an Islamic understanding of morality, include: promiscuity, immodesty, and homosexuality. The origins of censorship, rooted in the Islamic understanding of morality, functioned within the Egyptian public sphere, but also translated into the sphere of increasing Internet use. Organizations and bloggers have recognized and responded to Internet censorship. According to the OpenNet Initiative, "...authorities have increased their crackdown on online writers and bloggers and have harassed and detained them for their activities online and offline."¹⁰

Blogger Abdel Kareem Soliman experienced such a crackdown. Soliman's story links the concepts of blogging and censorship to lived reality in Egypt. His case evidenced a pivotal and contemporary instance of the role of censorship in policing Egyptian bloggers. Soliman was sentenced in Alexandria to four years in prison based on charges of libel against both Islam and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak (The Associated Press 2007). The ramifications seemed endless for Soliman, who was arrested twice for speaking against the university he attended, and was eventually expelled from law school because of his subversive blogging (Saleh 2007). Soliman's politically subversive blogging was punished harshly by the state. Although stories of punishment for blogging, demonstrated by the case of Soliman, do not directly correlate with stories told by queer Egyptian bloggers, the threat of censorship, policing, and punishment are the same.

After Soliman's arrest, Saleh (2007) predicted, "[This] trial is an indication of the shape of things to come for Egypt's small but increasingly outspoken online community." Movement toward finding recognition and social freedoms became a key point of conversation in the blogosphere. Activism in the blogosphere was also "...dubbed a catalyst for change... some argue that blogs could be an empowering tool for society, especially in countries where strict media censorship and surveillance is conducted" (Goggin and McLelland 2009). Blogs, then, transition

into a site of struggle between state censorship and Egyptian bloggers' resistance to censorship (Browne, Lim, and Brown 2007). Resistance to censorship further manifests the desire to promote and continue social networking and the creation and maintenance of blogs in Egypt. The Egyptian blogosphere, then, provides a potentially empowering site for resistance to censorship (Elting et al. 2009).

The lived realities of queer bloggers are made political because they challenge state-sanctioned heteronormativity and greater socio-political mores. Queer blogging, then, is politically subversive and therefore punishable by the Egyptian government. Queer blogs are not necessarily regulated or punished in the same way as Soliman's subversive blogging was, but the threat of punishment and imprisonment remains. The highly politicized and subversive nature of queer blogging continues despite cultural and legislative trends towards censorship, punishment, and police entrapment. In recent history, these cultural mores have resulted in tangible negative impacts upon real queer bodies.

HOMOPHOBIC LAW AND VIOLENCE: BLOG RESPONSES TO THE CAIRO 52

Homophobic law and the institutionalized homophobic violence carried out by state institutions offer insight into the lived realities of queer individuals in Egypt. Importantly, the theoretical approaches relating to censorship translate into a direct policing and censorship of gay men's bodies in literal Egyptian space. Gay men in particular are persecuted, policed, imprisoned, and tortured due to sodomy laws. One account, *Waleed's Story*, a short article, based on interviews, that appears in *Index on Censorship*, offers a representation of many gay men's experiences, describing some aspects of the lived realities gay men face. I also emphasize the events surrounding the Cairo 52, which tell the harsh story of institutionalized oppression, imprisonment, and punishment of gay men in Cairo. Gay male bloggers address these events and homophobic violence, a critical point of access into the responses to Egyptian state-sanctioned homophobic violence and law.

Currently, Egyptian law lacks a statute explicitly prohibiting sodomy or other sex acts. Charges against homosexual sex are made under either "offences against public morals and sensitivities," or "violating the

teachings of religion and propagating depraved ideas and moral depravity.”¹¹ The Egyptian police carries out this institutionalized homophobic violence. Punishments for male homosexuality include unlawful imprisonment in degrading prisons, police brutality and torture, and the resulting ostracized social status.

Waleed's Story describes societal and individual rejection, imprisonment, and acts of police brutality and torture. Waleed, who was arrested for “debauchery” and accused of homosexuality, recounted the horrors of being kept in the “refrigerator,” a closed cell unsuitable even for animals—it had no ventilation or toilet, and was overcrowded with the wounded and tortured bodies of gay men (Long 2005). The following information articulates the modes of torture used by police investigators and detectives in Egypt as recently as 2008:

Police and the [State Security Investigations Service] reportedly employed torture methods such as stripping and blindfolding victims; suspending victims by the wrists and ankles in contorted positions or from a ceiling or door-frame with feet just touching the floor; beating victims with fists, whips, metal rods, or other objects; using electric shocks; dousing victims with cold water; and sexual abuse, including sodomy. Victims reported that security officials threatened them and forced them to sign statements for use against themselves or their families should they in the future lodge complaints about the torture.” (U.S. Department of State 2009).

Waleed's story includes police brutality, unsanitary prison conditions, and police malfeasance (Long 2005). The case of Waleed demonstrates the heteronormative cultural norms at work that permit and encourage the punishment of non-normative, non-heterosexual individuals. Waleed's punishment, based on “debauchery,” deeply conceptualized the absence of human rights in Egypt, and was explicitly demonstrated by the police brutality he experienced and his unjust imprisonment. But the case of Waleed, who was accused of being gay, is only one glimpse of such injustice.

The Cairo 52, or the Queen Boat Raid, is perhaps the most well-known moment in recent Egyptian history of explicit homophobic violence, which, in 2001, gained global attention. As Nicola Pratt (2007, 131) illustrates, throughout Cairo, “[S]ome 60 men were arrested and

detained at different police stations,” fifty-four were incarcerated, and fifty-two were later charged. The men, assumed to be homosexual were charged with “habitual debauchery” (132). They were jailed in degrading prison facilities, much like those described in Waleed’s Story. After fifty-two men were sentenced, the arrested became known as the Cairo 52. The arrests and subsequent sentencing gained worldwide attention from human rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual organizations and news media (Parvez 2007).

Despite the global attention surrounding the Cairo 52, and the global protest against the arrests, the Egyptian press failed to report on the Cairo 52 arrests and trial.¹² The failure of the Egyptian government to publicly recognize the incident suggested a deep-rooted anxiety and cultural silence pertaining to homophobic violence. Also, such silencing is connected with imported modes of power and control. Further analysis of the interaction between the victims and the state suggest male heterosexual assumptions that homosexuality disrupts what is perceived as normal homosocial bonding among men within state structures (Pratt 2007). Pratt’s (2007, 138) critical analysis of state repercussions of the Cairo 52 posited the following: “[T]he public harassment of homosexual men represents an opportunity to regain control of the ‘inner domain’¹³ of the nation—meaning the sphere of personal and familial relations—by (re)asserting heterosexism as the only socially and politically acceptable means of ordering gender relations and identities.” The point of dissonance between state protection and the harassment, imprisonment, and torture of homosexual men, demonstrated in the events surrounding the Cairo 52, was signaled and voiced by liberal, pro-gay blogs in the Egyptian blogosphere.

The Egypt Guy, the primary blogger on *The Egypt Blog*, asserted that the Cairo 52 was an anti-gay campaign, citing the particular significance of the charges of “religious contempt” and “habitual debauchery.”¹⁴ He discussed the institutionalized homophobia present throughout the Cairo 52 arrests and trials. The Egypt Guy wondered “whether the state-supported anti-gay campaign that started 2001 is now over, since there hasn’t been any news on this since February 2004.”¹⁵ The recognition that the Cairo 52 functioned as an institutionalized anti-gay campaign is both a radical notion and as an astute observation of the state structures at work that impact queer individuals. Yet, The Egypt Guy remains

hopeful, "I don't know, hopefully it's over by next year or maybe it's already ended now!"¹⁶ The Egypt Guy's responses to the Cairo 52 suggest his yearning for the Cairo 52 and homophobic state-sanctioned violence to be over; they simultaneously explore the notion that the state's behaviors are unacceptable and express his hope for their replacement.¹⁷

Clearly, these structures prohibit queer individuals from emancipation from the deeply rooted heteronormative social mores and values perpetuated by legal and police enforcement institutions. Egyptian emphasis on heteronormativity, demonstrated in *Waleed's Story* and the Cairo 52, results in the great potential for internalized homophobia among gay men. One blogger, Kareem Azmy, included a caveat on his personal blog: "If you are under 21 years... If you [have] a weak personality... If you are experiencing homophobia... Please leave [this] blog... I am not responsible for your [sexual] orientation before or after reading my journal."¹⁸ Cultural anxieties about homosexuality impact Azmy's internalized complexities about his self-identification within a framework of Egyptian cultural norms. The implications manifest in forms of internalized oppression and internalized homophobia, which are deeply embedded in cultural normativities, evidenced by the serious, threatening, and harmful policing and literal censorship of alternative sexual practices.

Azmy maintains and perpetuates internalized oppression and internalized homophobia with these remarks. Yet, this reaction to the threat of violence is not unfounded and is expressed as a complex set of fears in Azmy's entry entitled "Short Stories."¹⁹ In this entry, Azmy begins by outlining normal day-to-day activities: riding on public transportation and shopping for new clothes. But his day, and the narration, are arrested by longing and intricate fears, realized in a moment of interchange between he and a mannequin in the fitting room of a clothing store. It is not a lustful interchange, Azmy says, but a moment of unfulfilled longing and reflection about an imagined lover. Unfulfilled because "he was afraid to recognize his love for him." The pervasiveness of fear in Azmy's daily life demonstrates both the real threat of homophobic violence and also the deeply embedded internalized homophobia.

Questions surrounding human rights for queer people arise and are addressed in global responses, particularly to the Cairo 52. This event in particular brought an international focus on the relationship

between law, social justice, and queer individuals in Egypt. While Pratt argued that the Cairo 52 incident did not result in greater human rights activism within Egypt, the fact remains that Egyptian bloggers raised questions and concerns surrounding the events. While these responses in the blogosphere may not emulate a Western model for queer activism, voices gathered and were heard, particularly those of gay men. In order to vie for further change towards the acceptance of queer individuals in Cairo, the power relationships that maintain structural oppression must be illuminated and redirected toward equality and protection for queer individuals. The above stories offer vital accounts from queer Egyptians including emotional responses: fear, punishment, and the terror of imprisonment grounded in lived realities. These responses provide a chance for gay men's voices to be heard—voices which are still shrouded in cultural silence in Cairo.

LESBIAN IDENTITY ONLINE

The emphasis of gay men's voices pertaining to law and homophobic violence online was striking. Overwhelmingly, lesbian blogs do not speak to homophobic violence or law. What, then, are the themes relevant to Egyptian lesbians, if not homophobic violence? The following argument pursues several possible answers, which suggest a disjuncture between the needs of gay men and lesbian women, and the consequent themes discussed in the blogosphere. While homosexual persecution and laws regulating homosexual sex are critical in understanding part of the picture relating to queer individuals, the laws and legal policing discussed relate most directly to gay men. I turn now to lesbian identities, emphasizing portions of two Arabic language blogs, geographically located in Egypt, titled *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman* and *Always Others*. The words and often poetic descriptions of these women's lived realities recognize and positively validate Egyptian lesbian women's experiences. In order to synthesize and further analyze the two blogs, I also incorporated important snapshots from *Bint el Nas*, which offer English and Arabic language journals, art, poetry, and visuals. *Bint el Nas* provided discursive additions to my analysis, as one emphasis on the site is addressing personal and political identities through international activism and raising consciousness.

Emraa Methlya, author of a blog titled *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*,²⁰ offers myriad ways to defend lesbianism through poetic entries and responds to questions posed by other bloggers. Emraa Methlya, translated as “lesbian woman,” created a charming pink blog, an aesthetic that challenges associations between lesbianism and masculinity. One entry, “Lesbianism and Homosexuality,”²¹ addresses the categorization of identities. Emraa Methlya lists a series of identity factors relating to women’s lives, including marriage and pregnancy. The entry illuminates the dissonance she experiences when the path towards “true womanhood” is undesirable or unobtainable. The cultural assumptions of female identity, marriage and reproduction, do not pertain to her body—thus, she implicitly raises questions about women’s bodies and the cultural expectations for marriage and reproduction. It is not clear whether Emraa Methlya’s main priority while blogging is subversive optimism about her lesbian identity, or her feminist views manifest online. Most likely, it is a combination of both (but I hesitate to suggest she is a feminist without first reading her self-ascription of the identity).

“Frigidaire” (from the French, “refrigerator”) includes a romantic lesbian moment.²² Initially, the setting of their meeting took place, “in the old warm wooden coffee house.... We drank hot tea and went to the house [and] did not stop talking about our lives, and what we do, and our damaged relations.” Their conversation is punctuated with lines like, “I like the color of your eyes,” and “I smiled.” The image of warmth and mutual affection carried through the narration. By the end, the two women are cuddling closely, paralleled by the intensity of the subversive literary moment, “...and we met in the arena... and [I] temporarily drew small hearts on her body [to] remember me by.” This image of romance and closeness described a moment of strength and solidarity pitted against the frosty title—the setting of the refrigerator.

Another blog authored by a lesbian woman, Kasber, in Cairo, is named *Always Others*.²³ The meanings behind her deliberate blog title are fascinating. The use of the term “Other,” interpreted as a status, demonstrates to the reader that Kasber understands the position of the categories of “woman” and “lesbian” as ostracized socially. Is Otherness impossible to overcome? At the same time, the proclamation of Other status allows individuals to define their own identity, even if that identity

contrasts with normative identities. There is potential strength in adopting and celebrating Otherness as a self-ascribed identity. The entries in the blog further develop a sense of solidarity shared by Kasber and the respondents on *Always Others*.

Kasber speaks knowingly about the oppressor and the oppressed in an entry, “Life.”²⁴ Kasber asserts, “you are the oppressor and the oppressed. Good and bad... the judge and the convicted.” Kasber sheds light on power relationships in terms of gender and sexuality. Because Egypt consistently polices and punishes both women and queer individuals, Kasber suggests the absence of liberation not for herself, but rather the state. The argument repositions the authorities as oppressing themselves by limiting the liberation of others. This assertion, and the blog entry, is celebrated by respondents who agree and encourage Kasber’s thoughtful entries.

Yet, she has not always been so confident and empowered. In a detailed in a 2007 entry entitled, “Who am I?” Kasber begins by saying, “I closed my eyes and sighed pain.”²⁵ The process demonstrated throughout her blogs is tumultuous, yet recent entries gain strength of voice and convey a sense of devoted online solidarity. Kasber’s demonstrated struggle throughout the blog, highlighted in the aforementioned excerpts, is reflected like a river—swelling and shrinking, widening and lengthening, struggling in drought, and bursting over the banks during the rainy season. The emotional realities Kasber experiences are all noteworthy, and fortunately, Kasber blogged and received supportive feedback during all of these times.

Similar to *Always Others* and *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*, one distinctly more multinational blog, *Bint el Nas*, offers a comprehensive and alternative discourse of queer Arab women’s experiences.²⁶ *Bint el Nas* incorporates poetic explorations, diary entries, and responses to multiple subjectivities from authors. An exploration of a multinational site like *Bint el Nas* adds to the discussion of the lesbian blogs located in Egypt by offering an additional global context in which the Egyptian lesbian blogs function.²⁷ The vernacular and collective vision present on *Bint el Nas* broadens the scope for change through multinational perspectives pertaining to queer Arab women’s experiences.

The introduction to Issue 10 of *Bint el Nas* demonstrates the sentiment of pride, hope, and longing:

...And I am filled with a fierce pride in us. We are so fucking beautiful. There are so many forces working against us seeing our own beauty... so many voices saying that we don't exist, that we're ugly, that we're perversions of nature. In the midst of all these hateful voices, Bint el Nas has offered an invitation and a challenge to say something different. And we have risen to that challenge, we have answered that invitation, we have responded to the founders' call for subversive optimism.²⁸

Bint el Nas blogger Nadyalec clarifies the term subversive optimism to mean, "...refusing to be ground down by the people who hate us and want us to hate ourselves."²⁹ Subversive optimism, then, acknowledges differences in power—those who oppress and those who are oppressed—but does not allow those differences to rule one's own lived reality.

Diaries of a Lesbian Woman and *Always Others* do not necessarily discuss subversive optimism in the same terms as *Bint el Nas*. Yet, the descriptions of lived realities challenge normative structures and implicitly work towards subversive optimism. The multiple marginalized intersectionalities of the lesbian women's blogs produce a strong sense of self-awareness and indicate collective identity. Nadyalec manifested self-awareness in the form of empowering dialogue with transformative potential: "the subjective experience of a character, interpreted through their perceptions, is often a crucial lever for change" (Apter and Garnsey 1994). The women of *Bint el Nas*, joined by cause with passionate resistance to pervasive cultural normativities, challenge existing structures and give the impression of empowerment by claiming agency on the blog. Although these women are separated in literal space, the safe, productive space on the Internet joins queer women across state boundaries. They are united by both cause and identity. These women hold one of the critical tools to confront normativities: subversive optimism.

Taken as a whole—and part of a greater whole—the voices on these sites ring loud and clear in moment of collective action. *Bint el Nas*, *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*, and *Always Others* address categorization and challenge the cultural limitations of women's experiences and lesbian experiences. Mary Caprioli (2005) defines collective action as working together towards social change, and that is happening in the Egyptian queer women's blogosphere. While these blogs demonstrate lesbianism

in multiple ways, their experiences of multiple oppressions and “Other” status simultaneously unite their voices.

CONCLUSION

This study, situated in the geographical state of Egypt, addresses concerns surrounding the central question: Why is queer liberation limited to Internet spaces? Is it, after all, possible to manifest queer emancipation in Egypt? Unravelling the answer begins with untangling the complexities of metaphorical colonization. Egypt’s colonial legacy plays a role in emerging dichotomies pertaining to social and cultural normativities. As I have argued, colonization of the ideas of policing bodies and sexuality has created a force that ignores queer bodies and silences queer voices. Such censorship is now manifest in Egyptian spaces: online and in literal space. Policing and censorship are two culturally embedded norms that make imagining queer liberation difficult, if not impossible.

Despite these distinct challenges, voices are emerging in the blogosphere. Gay men’s blogs have begun to articulate the need to acknowledge homophobic violence. Their stories demonstrate that homophobic policing of bodies has, in some cases, erupted into violent suppression of specific behaviors and bodies. As evidenced in Cairo 52, which garnered global attention, injustice, shame, and imprisonment all became central to understanding the drastic consequences of gay identity. Lesbian blogs grapple with different issues: the subtleties of touch and romance, longing, and seeking connection. The stylistic difference, too, sets lesbian blogs apart from gay men’s blogs. The lesbian blogs emphasize expression, poetry, and art. While the voices are drastically different, one of the pivotal realizations is that these voices are speaking. They are speaking in complex ways about their experiences, and longings for a better future. And these voices are growing in the blogosphere with each and every keystroke.

Yet, there is a stark disconnect between the blogosphere occupied by gay men and that of lesbian women. Gay men’s blogs tend to emphasize law and freedom from homophobic violence. The lesbian blogs above focus on the importance of community building and collective action online; overall, they adopt a more poetic tone. Gay men’s blogs

intrinsically seem more individualized, rather than work to build collective unity. This divide based on gender speaks to the central question: How can queer liberation be achieved in Egypt? If queer men and queer women stress the importance of vastly different content, what is the bridge that connects them, rather than the barriers rooted in gender? One conclusion to be drawn is that the existence of queer blogs does not suggest anything about gender equality.³⁰ The work of queering the blogosphere can not necessarily be applied to queering Egyptian gender, which seems fixed, even among gay and lesbian blogs.

Addressing queer themes within the Egyptian blogosphere raises consciousness of queer experiences, and validates voices in the blogosphere. In effect, some aspects of collective action occurring in the blogosphere are represented here. Yet, many questions remain about how queer individuals will obtain liberation in Egypt. Specifically, Terri Apter and Elizabeth Garnsey (1994, 30) maintain the need for policy level change to reformulate structure: "...Policies are contrived in the dark if they lack adequate study of the way in which structures constrain action or of circumstances in which women can redefine constraints and alter structures through their own agency. Neither manipulating structures nor relying on individual action alone can effect real change." While existing politics and law are critiqued in the blogosphere, I have not yet found convincing suggestions for political change. I was surprised, particularly in gay men's blogs about homophobic violence, that there was a general absence of political movement towards stopping such injustices. Regardless, queer individuals, with increased online presence, have strong voices, which are working to end cultural silence surrounding queer lived realities. In doing so, the blogs discussed here implement subversive optimism and collective action, two critical components for creating future changes towards liberation.

Perhaps the most important lesson from this work is challenging the Western gaze regarding queer individuals, and instead, hearing the voices of those occupying the literal space of Egypt. In order to do this, it is necessary to actively challenge dichotomous ways of thinking. One way to directly challenge binaries is to continue investigating the Egyptian blogosphere, looking for the changes desired by Egyptians, and avoiding imagining a Western liberation model and setting it on top of Egypt. Currently, emancipatory initiatives are not concrete, and while

subversive optimism and queer-positive conversations are happening in the blogosphere, no cohesive movement for change is apparent. Uniting across international borders with the intent of ensuring human rights, freedoms, and social justice for queer individuals will happen. But first, Egyptians must continue to blog!

NOTES

1. Despite the disagreement about which words are used to describe gay, lesbian, and queer lived realities, I attempted to employ the appropriate terminology throughout this study. Valerie Traub (2008, 14) posits, while discussing the various terms employed in different global contexts, "...that within the broader field of transnational sexuality studies, the question of whether the strategy of 'queering' necessarily imposes an unequal epistemic and methodological privilege is far from decided." I agree that the terms are in flux: and "gay," "lesbian," "bisexual" and "queer" are far from universally accepted terms, particularly between developed and undeveloped states. Within an Egyptian context, these terms are not inappropriate, but not necessarily celebrated, either. See also Merabet (2006).

2. Alan Bryman (2008) terms this "pseudo-objectivity," a form of working towards objective knowledge production, while simultaneously recognizing the limitations of Internet research.

3. Or, the use of traditional ethnographic methods through technology

4. The term "subversive optimism" is coined by blogger Nadyalec. See "Introduction" on Bint el Nas: Issue 10. <http://www.bintelnas.org/10muqadeema/intro.html> (accessed on March 1, 2012).

5. The police tactic of entrapment is described in Waleed's Story (below) and threaded into the storytelling surrounding the Cairo 52 in the blogosphere.

6. See Faris Malik's "Introduction" on *Queer Jihad*, August 7, 2005: <http://www.well.com/user/queerjhd/aboutqj.htm> (accessed on March 30, 2012).

7. For more information on Anwar Sadat, economic liberalization, and al-Infatih, see Cleveland (2004) and Hinnebusch (1993).

8. See Egypt. The Initiative for an Open Arab Internet. The Arabic Network for Human Rights: Supporting Online Freedoms. <http://old.openarab.net/en/node/1633> (accessed on March 24, 2012).

9. See "Internet Filtering in Egypt." OpenNet Initiative: http://opennet.net/sites/opennet.net/files/ONI_Egypt_2009.pdf (accessed on March 1, 2012).

10. See "Internet Filtering in Egypt." OpenNet Initiative: <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/egypt> (accessed on March 1, 2012).

11. Gay & Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, Sodomy Laws around the World: <http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/world/egypt/egypt.htm> (accessed on March 1, 2012).

12. Gay & Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest: <http://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/world/egypt/egypt.htm> (accessed on March 1, 2012).

13. For a discussion of the significance of the “inner domain” of the nation, see Chatterjee (1993).
14. See “Homosexuality in Egypt,” May 8, 2005: <http://www.theegyptblog.com/2005/05/homosexuality-in-egypt.html> (accessed on March 24, 2012).
15. See “Anti-Gay Campaign Over?” September 11, 2004: <http://theegyptblog.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
16. See “Anti-Gay Campaign Over?” September 11, 2004: <http://theegyptblog.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
17. Importantly, the Egypt Guy indicates what he wants to be *over*, not what he might like to see *instead* of the existing structures. There is no suggestion for reform in The Egypt Blog.
18. This text appears in the side bar on <http://kareemazmy.blogspot.com/> (accessed on March 30, 2012).
19. See Kareem Azmy’s “Short Stories,” September 8: http://kareemazmy.blogspot.com/2008/09/blog-post_03.html (accessed on March 1, 2012).
20. See *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*: <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
21. See “Lesbianism and Homosexuality,” *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*: <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
22. See “Frigidaire,” *Diaries of a Lesbian Woman*: <http://emraamethlya.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012). The title is poignant—a reference to living “in the closet,” represented by the coldness and isolation of being inside of a refrigerator.
23. See <http://www2kasber.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
24. See the April 11, 2010 posting, “Life,” on *Always Others*: <http://www2kasber.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
25. See “Who am I?” on *Always Others*: <http://www2kasber.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
26. While *Bint el Nas* offers an invitation to all self-ascribed categories of queerness, the readings generally focus on women’s experiences, which implicitly suggest the separation between the lesbian and gay blogospheres. See <http://www.bintelnas.org> (accessed on March 24, 2012).
27. *Bint el Nas* does not specify a geographically bound hub. It is clear from content that women from within and without the United States are writers here, making this a relevant, multinational blog site.
28. See “Introduction” on *Bint el Nas*: Issue 10. <http://www.bintelnas.org/10muqadeema/intro.html> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
29. See “Introduction” on *Bint el Nas*: Issue 10. <http://www.bintelnas.org/10muqadeema/intro.html> (accessed on March 1, 2012).
30. The Egypt Guy, in an entry entitled, “Housewives!” states that “women don’t have as many problems in Egypt as do gays and people arrested and tortured in police stations throughout Egypt for no reason....” <http://theegyptblog.blogspot.com> (accessed on March 1, 2012).

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