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Dangerous Liaisons

The Exceptional Gay Palestinian in Human Rights Documentaries

by

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Abstract: The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli struggle is provocative creative fodder for independent media makers who attempt to unravel the myriad political and cultural battles within Palestine. Within the same year as the configuration of the wall, World Pride 2006, an international event organized by Interpride, one of the oldest US-based organizations promoting gay and lesbian global solidarity, was held in Jerusalem. The controversial nature of this event created a mini-movement of documentaries shot in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories between 2006-2009 that dealt with self-identified gay Palestinians. How do non-Palestinian media artists capture the stated complexities of sexual identities within such a contested physical space? What happens when non-Palestinians create media that privileges their own political agendas over the agendas of their participants whom they supposedly speak for? How are the media maker's subjective bias visually constructed through visual style and documentary submode? I will textually analyze the documentary, *City of Borders* (Yuh Suh 2009), and argue the documentary visually illustrates frustrating conundrums by advancing Western perceptions of the gay rights agenda in Israel and Palestine over the social, economic, and legal injustices that *all* Palestinians encounter in their lives.

Introduction

The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli struggle is provocative creative fodder for independent media makers to investigate the myriad political and cultural battles within Palestine. Under their lens, Palestine is often explored by documenting the Israeli-West Bank Barrier that has been under construction since 2006. It is ironic that in the same year as the configuration of the wall, World Pride 2006, an international event organized by Interpride, one of the oldest US-based organizations promoting gay and lesbian global solidarity, was held in Jerusalem. World Pride 2006 garnered protests from conservative Jews, Christians, and Muslims due to religious

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reasons, as well as human rights organizations against Israel's governmental policies such as the development of Jewish settlements in the West Bank, such as New York based No Pride Without Palestinians. The controversial nature of this event piqued the curiosity of several media makers interested in its unique religious and sexual politics, and created a mini-movement of documentaries shot in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

How do these non-Palestinian media artists capture the stated complexities of sexual identities within such a contested physical space? What happens when non-Palestinians create media that privileges their own political agendas over the agendas of the people whom they supposedly speak for? How are the media maker's subjective bias visually constructed through style and the performative documentary submode? To further engage with these questions, I will closely examine the documentary, *City of Borders* (Yuh Suh 2009) which has come out of the mini-movement described above.

City of Borders, like other Western-produced independent documentaries on this topic, focuses on self-identified gay Palestinians who grapple with their sexual, racial, and national identities under the shadow of the elephantine Israeli-West Bank wall that Palestinian national activists consider a symbol of apartheid. The Israeli rationale for the wall, shared by many Westerners, is that it exists to protect their country from the threat of Palestinian attacks on civilians, which have increased since the Second Intifada (The Palestinian uprising) in 2000. Further complicating matters, the wall creates isolated ghettos in the West Bank, disempowering Palestinians within the region and rupturing any potential of an autonomous Palestinian nation-state. With regard to this politically unstable society, how can gays and lesbians negotiate their sexual identities when their lives are so engulfed by national violence and war? I argue *City of Borders* visually illustrates this frustrating conundrum by advancing Western perceptions of the gay rights agenda in Israel and Palestine over the social, economic, and legal injustices that *all* Palestinians encounter in their lives. Despite the participation from Palestinian subjects whose blatant marginalized status in Israel problematizes the concept of an all-inclusive gay sexuality, *City of Borders* attempts to construct a global, universal, borderless, GLBTQ community, and marginalizes groups, communities, cultures, or nations that do not accept Western concepts of sexuality.

I will create a close film analysis of *City of Borders* that reveals how sexual identities are constructed visually and sonically by the media maker, as well as by the self-reflexive performativity of one of the main Palestinian participants, Boody. I am interested in the intersections of Boody's mediated socially-constructed identities, and how they simultaneously marginalize *and* empower him. Boody's performativity undermines the central argument of the documentary, because through his performance (or non-performance) of gender, sexuality, and nationality, he contradicts essentialist claims of innate identities. The complex political context of Boody's life and identity is obvious, even though *City of Borders* treats his sexual identity as paramount, in order to advocate for universal gay and lesbians rights. The documentary's scope is even more slippery when considering Boody's natural charisma and charm, which makes it even more difficult for the audience to negoti-

ate with their feelings of empathy for the participant marginalized through documentary's paternalistic rhetoric.

Defining Performativity in Documentaries

In the past twenty years, there has been a significant amount of scholarship written about the so-called "performative" documentary submode. People unfamiliar with documentary theory usually presume, that performance and documentary might not exactly be contradictory, but they cannot work in conjunction with each other, because a performance supposedly dismantles the feeling of "realness" a documentary generates. Film scholar, Stella Bruzzi defines the performative documentary as:

> […] Built around the intrusive presence of the filmmaker or self-conscious performances by its subjects – is the enactment of the notion that the documentary only comes into being as it is performed, that although the factual basis (or document) can pre date any recording or representation of it, only the film itself is necessarily performative because it is given meaning by the interaction between performance and reality (Bruzzi 2006: 186).

Bruzzi's insightful definition of the documentary submode is crucial in understanding how a performance represents actuality. The documentary performance stylistically reveals the negotiation between the camera, participant, and media maker by purposely alerting the viewer about the media maker's creative process. The performative documentary critically acknowledges the presence of the camera, and a new actuality emerges out of the self-reflexive production. Cameras usually make people feel self-conscious due to the fear of being unfairly represented or exploited. However, in the performative documentary there is more freedom and encouragement for the participant to perform and acknowledge the camera's presence, or the documentarian is self-reflexively performing the role of the documentarian for the camera. Film and Television scholar, Brenda Smaill posits:

> It would be naïve to read these performances as unmediated presentations of a self that are not subordinated to the filmmaker's vision. Yet to simply understand these representations of subjectivity as outcomes of the documentary process is to ignore how this process can function as a site of dialogue between film-maker and filmed. While the finished documentary is ultimately out of the hands of those depicted, the performance indicates a negotiation between the capacity for the subject to speak and the context in which speech is enabled (Smaill 2006: 20).

The relationship between the media maker and the participant is in a state of constant flux during production, and in the performative documentary it is usually explored in great detail in order to reveal the power negotiations between the media maker and the participant. This documented relationship is a clever narrative device that implies how the participant has at some agency in the creative process, even though the media maker is the primary architect who constructs the documentary. The most notable methods of visually representing this relationship are: the physical presence of the media maker in the documentary who engages with the participants within the frame, using the voice of the media maker to ask a question, even though the media maker is not in the frame, or a participant directly engaging with the camera.

The Construction of a Gay Eden

City of Borders follows the lives of several self-identified gay and lesbian Israelis and Palestinians who frequent the only gay bar in Jerusalem, called the Shushan. This club is a safe haven for them to openly socialize, flirt, dance, and exhibit their same-sex desires without the risk of public ridicule and violence in the conservative holy city. The documentary constructs Shushan as a space where national and religious identities are overpowered by sexual desire, because Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Christians, and Muslims co-exist peacefully within it.

The Shushan exists as a symbol of peace, and its Palestinian and Israeli customers enthusiastically praise it in *vox populi* evening street interviews about how transformative it is to have a queer-friendly Israeli-Palestinian space in Jerusalem, because it is the first chance they ever had to confront the "enemy" in a desegregated social environment. However, what happens when the lights go on and everyone leaves? Is it possible to form solidarity with the enemy, and eventually work towards social change outside of this safe haven, or is the documentary manufacturing an idealistic construction?

Mas'ud Zavarzadeh in his analysis of the political intentions of media work states, "…A filmic space is the site of the warring forces in culture between what social reality *is* under present ideological and economic practices and what it could *become*" (Zavarzadeh 1991: 23). His adroit observation is deceptively obvious; nevertheless it is important to consider, what *is* the function of documentary representation? Do media makers construct social worlds that they wish were actualites, or are these idealistic spaces within society's grasp? Do they really believe in documented actuality, or are they conscious of its construction? I want to believe that desire overpowers history, race, ethnicity, religion, and unequal power relations, but when contemplating the marginalization Palestinian population due to their statelessness and occupied status in Israel and the Palestinian Territories it makes the representation of the Shushan problematic, because sexual desire cannot transcend social injustices.

Yuh Suh, the director of *City of Borders* states, "Israelis and Palestinians and people from clashing worlds share a common need for belonging and acceptance" ("Queer Film Fest Preview City of Borders" www.xtra.ca). Suh is very clear about her motivation, even though it is important to remember there might be a discrepancy between what an artist conceives, and how it is received by an audience. I do not want to conflate my own hesitation of embracing the Shushan by speaking for the "viewer", but I am compelled to ask how Palestinians equally belong to a community where they do not have the same equal rights and privileges as Israelis? What are the creator's intentions and what is she leaving out of the representation? Fully grappling with these problems will involve a closer textual analysis, and an engagement with the question about performativity that was posed at the beginning of the chapter.

A prologue sets the tone of a work, and it is necessary to have an engaging hook to lure the viewer into a mediated world. It creates a specific mood and establishes how invested the audience will be in the piece. *City of Borders* opens with an es-

tablishing hand-held shot in a moving vehicle on a highway that is parallel to the Israeli-West Bank Wall. Within the same shot, the camera tracks the massive barrier that stretches outside of the periphery of vision. Text dissolves onto the moving image, which identifies the setting as Ramallah, West Bank. A male voiceover out of the frame narrates, "This wall is the wall between Palestine and Israel". A cut is made which identifies the speaker in a medium shot of a young man in his early twenties who wears a choker with a large red heart charm in the center. He continues ominously, "This wall was put only to protect Jerusalem from us". Text identifies the man as a Palestinian named Boody. A cut is then made to the rearview mirror where an ornament hangs of Yasser Arafat making a peace sign, and then another cut to a close-up of the same ornament.

Suh sets up the political stakes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the words of her participant. Boody's intonation reveals that he is personally offended by the construction, and the first four shots of the documentary generate a sense of danger, suspense, and disorientation via the shaky camera shots.

Boody is not allowed into Israel without a permit due to his nationality. However, in the dark of night, with several friends, he finds an opening in a wire fence, and illegally crosses the border so they can go to the Shushan. If Boody gets caught by Israeli soldiers without his papers, they will arrested him, but he remains steadfast in his pursuit of reaching Israel.

The next scene begins with an establishing shot of the back of Boody's feet as he walks in the dark. The camera pans up to his body, and transforms into an over-the-shoulder shot. Boody glances over his shoulder and says, "If they catch us. We are going straight to the jail". He then puts a piece of bubblegum his mouth. There is a cut to a wide shot with Boody gesturing to his friends to follow him as he holds one of his male friend's hands, and then he shushes the people behind him. There is another cut of Boody and his friends in a long shot, as he stops walking and hands his friend his bag. He tells his friends, "You wait right here, and I'll go check the fence". The camera tracks him as he disappears into the darkness. Afterwards there is a point of view shot of barbed wire and a broken metal fence, and Boody says, "It's open. Come on", in Arabic out of the frame. The camera follows him as he dodges barbed wire with efficiency and grace. When he has almost reached Israel, he pauses, turns around, and finally implicates the viewer on his journey, "This is the place we go from, every time we go illegal to Israel. We are not going to do bombs. We are not going to do anything wrong. We only go to have some fun, live our life." He cleverly understands that he is the future subject of a Western audience by addressing the viewer in English, and also establishes himself as not a "terrorist".

Film theorist, Elizabeth Cowie believes, "The look back at the camera disturbs the actuality shot by reversing the object of fascination from inside the scene to outside" (Cowie 1999: 27). When a participant directly addresses the camera it makes the audience conscious of the documentary construction, because we can no longer passively observe a moving image due to its self-reflexive style, even though the viewer obviously cannot respond back to him or her. However, the participant's monologue creates a level of intimacy and engagement with the work that is difficult to dismiss. Boody breaks the fourth wall, because he wants to reit-

erate to the viewer that he is an innocent man, while simultaneously committing a crime by illegally crossing the border. The audience metaphorically becomes an accomplice on his illicit journey, and depending on their views about immigration, or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he either becomes a criminal, a victim of the occupation and/or a hero by resisting it.

The next cut is a long shot of Boody climbing a wall with barbed wire in the foreground. Boody asks in Arabic, "There are no soldiers, right?" Boody sits on top of the wall, looks down, and hesitates. He turns around to face the camera, and says, "No I can't jump, no I can't". Boody then twists his body around, puts both hands on the wall, and jumps down. There is a sound of Boody landing on the ground and someone shushing everyone out of the frame. Text appears above the wall that reads "City of Borders". The final shot is of Boody once he is over the wall. It is a long shot, and Boody says in English, "We have to check if there is police from here", he looks in one direction, "or from here", and then the other. "There is nothing". He then walks away from the camera and says in Arabic, "Let's go sweetheart". To further complicate the construction of the prologue, and engage with the concept of performativity, I want to share a quote from Boody, who participated in another documentary called *Jerusalem is Proud to Present* (Nitzan Gilday 2008) which was shot around the same time he was involved with *City of Borders*. In *Jerusalem is Proud to Present*, Boody claims that whenever he visits the Shushan, he walks directly to the checkpoint that separates Ramallah from Israel, and specifically tells the guards that his destination is the Shushan, and they give him permission to cross the border without any issues. This confession contradicts the suspenseful prologue to *City of Borders*. Making claims about truth and fiction, and speculating about Boody's real journey to the Shushan that was not shown or spoken about in either documentary is fruitless, what is more beguiling to consider is the possibility that Suh created a narrative that might not be based on Boody's specific actuality. If this were the case, Suh makes a noble gesture at visually constructing how West Bank Palestinians negotiate with their marginalized status of being considered immigrants in Israel, especially if they are self-identified gays. The prologue leads the audience to believe that Boody and his friends illegally crossed the border to Israel, but they could be anywhere in Ramallah. Whether or not they illegally crossed the border becomes almost irrelevant, because their performance of documented actuality situates them within their Palestinianness, and alerts the audience how Palestinians endure and negotiate with the ongoing construction of the barrier. If Boody legitimately crossed the border illegally for the sole purpose of the documentary, it not only displays his bravery, but also reveals the self-reflexive presence of the media maker and her crew who become accomplices on his journey, because they put themselves at risk with him, even if they will be less severely punished than the Palestinians for not following the legal procedure of border crossings.

The Double Lives of Boody aka Miss Haifa

So far this article has exclusively focused on the representation of Boody's Palestinian identity and has not examined his sexual identity. One of the main reasons

for this omission is because Boody does not speak about his gay identity until later on in the documentary. With this in mind, it is important to consider why is Boody escaping Ramallah, "to live his life", in the prologue. What is he running away from? How is the West Bank constructed in *City of Borders*?

Ramallah is introduced in an establishing exterior wide shot of rooftops with several Palestinian flags blowing in the wind. There is a cut to a long shot of a house, and then another cut to a long shot of Boody in his bedroom, on his knees praying to Allah on a prayer rug. The camera tracks him as he stands up, and then there is a cut to a medium high angle shot of Boody praying. There is a cut to Boody praying on his knees from a side angle. Boody in voiceover, says in English, as the cameraman physically moves closer to him to create a close-up, "Prayer cleans everything. If I'm praying, and I only think about praying, it cleans me from inside". Boody wipes his face with both hands and then looks down. He kisses the Qur'an, and gently presses it against his forehead, and repeats the same action several times, while in voiceover he says, "God, never gave up on me. I'm sure about that". He holds the Qur'an to his heart, and there is a cut to a close-up of Boody putting the Qur'an on his folded mat after he finishes praying.

The next scene begins with an establishing long shot of Boody outside his house while a woman descends from the entranceway stairs. He turns around to the camera, smiles, and says, "That's my mom". His mother says, "Hi, everybody", in English and then starts speaking Arabic to Boody. In a voiceover, Boody says, "My Daddy is in America, since I was only eight-years-old. Him and my Mom are divorced now. They're not together anymore". Boody translates for his mother who speaks Arabic as she goes inside the house, he motions the cameraman to follow them and says, "She's hungry and wants us to eat, all of us". Boody, his mother, and his younger brother (who is never specifically acknowledged in the documentary), are preparing dinner in an establishing long shot. Boody carries a large metal plate and as he closes the window shade for privacy; in voiceover, he says, "I was the oldest male. I had to be the one who's responsible. I am always the boss of my family". There is a jump cut to Boody and his mother bringing pots of food to the kitchen table. Boody's voiceover, says, "At the start, I refused to be a gay". The camera focuses on the center of the table where Boody's mother puts a covered pot. Boody's voiceover continues, "I was really scared that my brother and my sisters…", there is a cut to Boody sitting down in his bedroom in a medium close-up shot, composed as a talking head interview, and then his voiceover transforms in sync with the moving image, "…were to do the same or think the same, so I refused to be a gay". There is a cut to a close-up shot of Boody's mother's hands on the pot on the table. She uncovers the pot, which reveals bulgur and peppers. The camera then pans upward to a smiling Boody looking down at his dinner, while in voiceover he says, "But then, I was thinking, ok, everyone is living their life, so I have to live my life too". There is another cut back to Boody's interview. He says, "I decided, yes I'm a gay, I'm going to live as a gay, and I don't care".

The next scene begins is an establishing close-up shot of Boody dancing and lip-syncing to Arabic pop music in his bedroom. The camera zooms out to show that Boody is dancing with two male friends. They shimmy their shoulders, and shake their hips like belly dancers. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of one

Boody's friends while he sings along to the music. He puts his arms in the air, and strikes an over the shoulder pose to the camera. The camera then pans left to Boody's other friend dancing, and then cuts to the close-up of Boody dancing. The camera then cuts to a medium close-up of Boody's friend, pans left to the other friend who does one last hip shake as the song ends, and then pans right to Boody who points to a poster on the wall of a young woman posing seductively with her finger on her lips, who most likely sings the song.

There is a cut to another scene of a long shot of Boody's mother sitting on a chair in the living room, as Boody sits on its arm. Their physical closeness is not only convenient to share the same frame for the interview, but also reveals the intimacy between them. They speak Arabic. Boody translates in English, "Ok, she's saying that I pray five times a day, and that she would never think that I'm gay, and won't believe it, and umm…" Boody's mother interrupts him in English, "Not me mamma, not me. You should not believe yourself that way". She then starts speaking in Arabic. Boody translates for her, "Because, I believe in God, and I know what's right and what's wrong". There is cut to a medium close-up of Boody's mother chewing gum. There is a cut back to the long shot, and Boody's mother says in English, "My brother's daughter, she wanna come tomorrow from America, and I want Boody to marry her". Boody looks exasperated and leaves the frame.

Suh creates several masterful juxtapositions that reveals how Boody leads two separate lives, as if his gay and Palestinian identities are at war with each other. Boody is torn between his traditional, gendered role as male head of the household, and his independent gay identity. Boody seems at peace with being a gay Muslim, but his mother sees these identities as complete contradictions. He cannot be a good Muslim if he lives a gay lifestyle. However, it is important to acknowledge that she is compassionate and accepting mother, because she can have a reasonable dialogue with him about his sexual identity. When there is only silence about sexual desire, this is a form of repression. Verbally expressing and acknowledging the existence of sex empowers humans, even though a discourse is taboo in many social situations in the public arena. If Boody's mother attempted to truly repress her son, she would not be negotiating with him about his sexual identity in a documentary. She disagrees with, but does not ignore his self-proclaimed sexual identity. Granted, her reaction is far from ideal, but her resistance is relatively mild compared to other possible scenarios. She is not in complete denial about Boody's sexual identity, even though she struggles to fully understand it.

However, what is visually represented in the documentary concerning Boody, has little to do with his sexual identity. He speaks about being gay, but he does not fully define what this identity means to him, even though he infers that it is a choice. The contrast between Boody identifying himself as gay in an interview, as his family prepares dinner in the B-roll footage, while in the next scene, he dances and vogues with his friends for the camera, is troubling, as if his gender transgression (which he exhibits within his lip-sync performance) is automatically pegged to his sexual desire and sexual identity. The parallel editing codes Boody as gay, because his gender performance is campy and self-reflexive. This performance might be a substitute for not showing Boody's sexual desire towards men (possibly because he was single at the time, or if he had a partner he might not have wanted to

be involved with the documentary while Boody was in Israel and the West Bank, but this is speculative). However, we need to remember that in the performative documentary, or even the documentary mode in general, the participant is performing a version of their actuality. Boody might be exaggerating for the camera, but there are so many moments throughout *City of Borders* where he refuses to abide by rigid gender constructions (I have noted several examples throughout the analysis of the prologue, but the most pertinent example is his drag performance). I am hesitant to easily conflate gender performance and sexual identity with each other, but with Suh's representation of Boody, there is admittedly much fluidity between these social constructions.

Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols observes a strong connection between gender and sexuality centered documentaries that challenge the social constructions they explore, which is useful when grappling with the documented representation of Boody:

> The political dimension to documentaries on issues of gender and sexuality, or other topics, joins an emphatically performative mode of documentary representation to the very issues of personal experience and desire that lead outward, by implication, to broader issues of difference, equality, and non-discrimination" (Nichols 2001: 160).

Nichols recognizes that individual performances of gender and sexuality destabilize heterosexism and patriarchy. The performative documentary submode reveals the marginalization of groups that do not fit easily into societal norms, as well as social and economic inequalities, and how the participants challenge such oppression. If we follow Nichol's notion of how an individual represents a group, Boody not only represents himself, he also arguably stands for the social injustices that all gay Palestinians encounter in their lives by revealing his struggles with family, religion, culture, and nationality, which are not alien to viewers who juggle multiple identities. Boody is a dream participant for any media maker who argues for gay identity politics, because he goes through such extreme lengths to participate in "out" culture in Israel. He desires a lifestyle that does not exist in Ramallah, that can only be found by crossing borders to Israel, which is why he is risks so much for apparently so little. However, does "living his life" compensate for the possibility of bodily harm or prison? According to Suh's selection of such a compelling but extreme participant, it is.

Currently, I have analyzed Boody's familial life in Ramallah and his social life in Israel, but it is also extremely important to examine how Palestine is constructed in *City of Borders*, because it visually provides us with a compelling index of Boody's desire to escape the West Bank.

The first moving image the audience sees of Ramallah outside of the prologue and Boody's household, is an establishing wide shot of men running on a dirt road which parallels a concrete wall that separates the West Bank from Israel. There is a cut to an insert shot of barbed wire, and then a cut to a wide shot of men throwing bags over a fence, and then a cut to a long shot that slightly zooms in on a man climbing. There is a jump cut to the same man on the other side of the border running away from the fence. The camera zooms in as he runs away. Suh does not provide any other context about these people crossing the border. They only function as faceless images that evade Palestine as well as the camera.

This is Suh's constructed vision of Ramallah. She juxtaposes men running away from Palestine with a city montage that depicts Ramallah as a chaotic space, heavily policed by masked soldiers who will never be implicated if a violent skirmish occurs, and political imagery such as Palestinian flags and pictures of Arafat plastered and blowing everywhere. She creates a mood that is full of danger and political intrigue where violence can occur at any moment, which can easily generate fear in the audience. The politically volatile shots contrast with people who live their lives as if they were numb to the threat of violence.

The next scene begins with an establishing long shot of three women walking on the sidewalk, and then the camera pans to Boody who was out of the frame. He says, in voiceover, "A lot of my friends are afraid to be a gay in the streets, but I don't". There is a cut to a long shot of men smoking hookah, and then a cut to a medium close-up of Boody. He continues with his voiceover, "It is very *ayb* to be a gay. *Ayb* means it's very ashamed to be a gay". Suh cuts back to the same soldiers in the flatbed pickup truck that were featured in her Ramallah montage in a long shot as they drive away from the camera.

There is no foregrounding of what it means to be a visible gay in the streets of Ramallah. Earlier in the documentary, Suh equates gay men with drag and gender-bending performances, via her juxtapositions and editing sequences, but Boody is not dressed as Miss Haifa in this scene. He wears a black hooded sweater shirt and jeans. Boody is without his friends, and he is not self-reflexively performing, or even physically acknowledging the camera. There is no visible evidence in these two shots that he is self-consciously performing his sexual identity. There is no dialogue in the moving image about his sexual identity; everything that he says is in the voiceover. His words do not remotely match his actions in this scene, which leads me to believe that Boody is visually and sonically constructed as having an essential gay identity. This scene counters the fluid performativity of gender and sexual identities in the earlier scenes, and renders Boody as powerless to a visually frightening Ramallah that is depicted throughout the work.

In order to further construct a homophobic Palestine, Suh conducts *vox populi* street interviews with four participants, and asks them, presumably since we never hear her asking the question, how they feel about gays and lesbians. The scene begins with an establishing long shot of two young men sitting and smoking outside a café. A female voiceover, says in Arabic, "Ramallah is very large and diverse". There is a cut to an outdoor fruit market that is shaded by numerous umbrellas. The voiceover continues, "So it's not strange for gays to be here". There is a cut to a medium close-up of the young woman. She says, "But I wish gays were not here. They diminish the beauty of Ramallah". There is a cut to a long shot of two older women merchants, and then a cut of several men walking past a fruit vendor selling apples. The next cut is a medium close-up of an older man who says, "We should put them in jail. We should put them in jail. This is forbidden for us". There is a cut to a long shot of several young women, and then a cut to a long shot of a group of young men conversing on the streets. After this B-roll, a cut is made to a medium close-up of young woman who says in English, "It's hard to see a gay here, and we have to kick them…", she punches the air, smiles, and says "We have to hate them". A cut is made to the last participant who is framed sitting down in a high

angle medium close-up. He is an older man, and says in Arabic, "There are Islamic laws against homosexual behavior. Islamic groups should not allow them to be together". The final shot is of the same Hamas soldiers driving away in their truck.

Already *City of Borders* privileges "liberal and progressive" Israel over "conservative" Palestine, because if an easily identifiable Westernized queer space existed in Palestine, Boody would not be putting himself in such jeopardy. However, Boody seems to be at greater risk, staying in Ramallah judging from the very homophobic comments from the interviewees. The audience roots for Boody to leave Palestine so he can find his sexual liberation, and create the lifestyle he covets. He fears for his life in Ramallah where we later learn that he is verbally harassed and receives death threats for being gay. Boody is proud to be a Palestinian, but in the documentary his sexual identity is paramount to the narrative.

Feminist scholar Jasbir Puar, in her critique of Western human rights groups, states, "It is also imperative that these coalitional efforts reject queer missionary, liberatory, or transcendent paradigms that might place Palestinian queers in a victim narrative parallel to that propagated by the Israeli state they are battling against" (Puar 2007: 33). Puar problematizes the construction of queer Palestinians as victims of a homophobic culture, because it fuels Israel into branding itself as the only democracy that is tolerant of gays and lesbians in the Middle East. Self-identified gay and lesbian Palestinians become double victims in these narratives because they are occupied by Israel, and marginalized by Palestinians. However, their gay identity is touted as more important than their stateless status, because their sexual identity has more universal appeal to Western gay and lesbian human rights groups.

The audience is introduced to a mediated Palestine that is apparently backward and uncultured because it does not support a public Western gay lifestyle, and Boody is constructed as a prisoner of a homophobic culture who has to overcome his race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion in order to be free. He is also represented as an exceptional Palestinian who rises above his culture and religion by embracing a Western sexual identity. According to Middle Eastern Studies scholars, Jin Haritawan, Tamisila Taugin, and Esra Erdem, "Individual Muslim women and gays are described as having emancipated or liberated themselves from their repressive culture, by embracing, the gender-progressive culture of the 'liberal West'. Not only do they confirm the exceptionality of the West they also emerge as exceptions to the rule that most women and gays 'from this culture' are in fact repressed" (83). It is vital to identify the hypocrisy of Western nation-states (and Israel) when they support heterosexist, racist, imperialistic, patriarchal power structures, while they accuse other nations of repressing women and gays and lesbians. It is extremely problematic to position Europe, Israel, and especially the United States, as examples of liberatory nation-states due to the level of governmental suspicion and surveillance practices that have increased substantially since 9/11, and since the Second Intifada in Israel. However, with the use of excessive violence, capital, and media supremacy these nation-states effectively position themselves as progressive democracies, while criticizing other nation-states that do not live up to their ideologies.

Joseph Massad argues, "The larger mission…is to liberate Arab and Muslim 'gays and lesbians' from the oppression under which they allegedly live by transforming them from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as homosexual and gay" (Massad 2001: 362). Massad believes that Muslims vehemently defend themselves against the universaliztion of sexual identities, because the battle of identity politics is a way for the West to impose their beliefs onto different cultures. *City of Borders* does not explore the question of why its Palestinian participants identify with gay and lesbian sexual identities. Despite the documentary's intentions to construct the gay movement in Israel as all-inclusive, it is extremely segregated since only Israelis and Palestinians (or "Palestinian-Israelis" as Israel refers to them) who legally reside in Israel have the privilege and physical access to these queer spaces and events. The gay movement in Israel is arguably inadequate for most Palestinians, because it is not aligned with their liberation; its primary beneficiaries are the Israelis who want Jerusalem to become a more secular and liberal society similar to Tel Aviv where the gay community is more established and tolerated.

To Suh's credit, the power differences between Palestinians and Israelis are greatly apparent throughout the documentary, but she undermines this progressiveness by not challenging the politics of the gay movement in Israel. *City of Borders* attempts to normalize Western sexual identities in Arab culture by investigating the lives of "out" Palestinians who accept these labels without confliction. People who have same-sex desires that do not identify with these identities are noticeably absent in the work (maybe because they refuse to participate or are unaware of such epistemology), because their inclusion would lead to layered complexities in Suh's political agenda. The documentary constructs gay and lesbian identities as innate and predetermined, and refuses to see them as political identities. There is never any discourse from the participants that counter these constructs, most likely because that would undermine Western queer activist media. It has been more than sixty-five years since the formation of the State of Israel, and its citizens are still fighting and defending their claim to Palestine. It is magical thinking to believe that sexuality will consume all other identity constructions in such a politically charged arena, and that these concepts are useful models for peace in the Middle East. *City of Borders* works hard to universalize Western sexual identities, but it does not engage conceptually with how limiting and destructive these binaries are for Palestinians who also worry about occupation, exile, and displacement. In a globalized world, Western labels cannot be ignored, but if one is strong and thoughtful enough they can at least be challenged, deconstructed, and resisted.

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