Fluidity of Sexuality, Language, and Music: Arabic Lyrics and Queer Arab Expression

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ABSTRACT

Similarly to the fluidity of sexuality, there is a fluidity to the gendered nature of the Arabic language. Using works from scholars in various fields, such as queer theory and Middle East studies, this thesis dissects the already-established language surrounding sexuality, while highlighting its inherently harmful nature. In other words, the thesis looks at how Eurocentric language surrounding sexuality is ultimately harmful to those with fluid sexualities, as well as queer Arab expression. Furthermore, it highlights how Arabs with fluid sexualities have been marginalized by Eurocentric ideas of sexuality through "Orientalism." It also tackles the importance of language, itself, when looking directly at queer Arabs. Lastly, it analyzes how the Arabic language, and its gendered nature, produces lyrics that are "potentially queer." This thesis argues that this gendered nature of the Arabic language, then, allows for openly queer Arab musicians to work within this structure, while also expanding beyond it, as a form of queer Arab expression.

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Marhaba.

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1. Introduction

In general, music is a space for queer people to interact with, resonate with, and create art that shapes their identity and form of expression. In this way, music and queer culture traverse with one another often; for queer musicians, music is where their passions and dreams are interwoven with their identity and self expression. It becomes crucial, then, to study queer musicians' songs and lyrics to better understand why it is an important part of their personhood. In doing so, a space is created where queer musicians' unique experiences are not only highlighted, but celebrated. This is why the focus of this thesis is on Arabic lyrics and queer Arab expression.

Sexuality is both complex and fluid. However, there are theories surrounding it that are dominantly derived from Eurocentric categories of it. This makes defining it, through the usage of Eurocentric language, inherently harmful. When specifically looking at the MENA region, this harm is amplified through "Orientalism" and Eurocentric ideas of what it means to be "queer." Therefore, it is important to highlight the significance of the Arabic language when it comes to queer Arab expression. Without it, the MENA region is left with Eurocentric definitions that are both limiting and violent. This, in extension, harms queer Arab artists. It paints a picture of the MENA region as inherently "heterosexual," which makes the existence of people with fluid sexualities in the region seem illusive, rather than grounded in reality. This, in turn, creates erasure, and assures a future where research on the region remains restricted to Eurocentric ideas surrounding it.

In this thesis, I use the term "queer Arab" as an umbrella term that encompasses Arabs who identify within the already-established, colonial terms (such as "queer," "gay," "lesbian," "homosexual"); as this thesis progresses, I make note of how such terms can be harmful as they

are rooted in Eurocentric ideas of sexuality. However, I continue to use the term as it is one that the openly queer Arab musicians that I talk about in my analysis identify and interact with. This is, in part, due to the limitations of working with the English language, in general. I use the terms "fluid," "fluidity," and "fluid sexuality" throughout this thesis to talk about those who don't identify with specific labels, and those to whom a label, in and of itself, is an afterthought. This is done, in turn, as a way of relating back to how heavily Eurocentricism influences and controls the "norms" and "traditions" of language and language-meaning throughout history. I use "heteronormative" as a descriptor for a world view that "presents gender roles as fixed and heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation" (Oxford Languages). I also use the term "MENA" to identify the region known as the Middle Eastern and North African or the SWANA (Southwest Asian and North African) region, as well as the already-established roots of it being a term that encompasses the region's sociopolitical climate, rather than the people living within the region itself, as they are vast and multicultural. Lastly, I use "Eurocentric" as a descriptor for, and a critique of, the cultural biases and unbalanced power structures that point to a "superior" versus "inferior" complex that is created to undermine the influence and power of countries that are outside of Europe/North America. I am not, however, generalizing the region and grouping its people into a set category, as it is vast and multicultural. In using these terms, I am highlighting the complexity of language, and the contradictions that come with it, as I work around it to deliver the thesis's argument.

This thesis asks the following questions: how are Eurocentric definitions of sexuality inherently harmful? In addition, how do Eurocentric ideas of the MENA region reinforce this harm? Can language that diverts from Eurocentric ideas of sexuality be an important tool to limiting this harm? Also, how does the complexity of the Arabic language, and the conversations

surrounding popular Arabic songs, allow for "potentially queer" themes of romance to be produced in music? How does this complexity, and the nuances that come with it, help queer Arab musicians when it comes to their own identity and self-expression? How does this, in turn, inspire the music that they, themselves, produce? How does this music—produced by openly queer Arabs—help queer Arabs and queer Arab expression, overall?

This thesis draws from research on queer theory and Middle East studies to examine famous Arabic lyrics. Specifically, it explores these lyrics using the "queer lens," while diverting from the assumption that their interpretations are inherently "heterosexual." In doing so, this research puts emphasis on queer Arab artists' experiences, which, in turn, recognizes the queer Arab experience outside of the generalized, Eurocentric ideas of sexuality surrounding it. It also does this by looking at how songs written and composed by openly queer Arab artists themselves are used as a form of queer Arab expression.

Through this research, the focus is to fill in the academic gap on queer Arab research, as it is a community that is often overlooked and dismissed through generalized, Eurocentric ideas of the MENA region[1]. It highlights the region's multidimensionality, while also recognizing that queer Arabs, in simple terms, exist. Not only do they exist, but their experiences are equally multidimensional. The overall goal of the research is to ensure that the queer Arab experience isn't pushed aside for the sake of reinforcing Eurocentric ideas about the MENA region that deem it unfit to hold space for the queer Arab community.

[1] For example: currently, the phenomenon of Israeli pinkwashing (which is described as "when a state or organization appeals to LGBTQ+ rights in order to deflect attention from its harmful practices") is an attempt from Israel to "salvage its abysmal global reputation of being a colonial aggressor, through exploiting and even encouraging anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia to present itself as a comparatively modern cosmopolitan haven and boost its tourism revenue in the process" (*Decolonize Palestine*). This, in turn, completely dismisses the queer Palestinian experience, and paints the region as inherently violent, "heterosexual," and incapable of holding space for the queer community.

2. Literature Review: The Fluidity of Sexuality and the Importance of Language for Queer Arab Expression

Introduction: Sexuality, Fluidity, and Language

In order to explore how openly queer Arab musicians are using Arabic lyrics and the Arabic language as a way to live out their queer identity, it is important to first break down several things. First, there is a fluidity to expressions of sexuality in the MENA region, and Eurocentric notions of explicitly defining these expressions are inherently harmful and limiting to this fluidity. Second, these notions—along with "Orientalism" and Eurocentric language—negatively affect Arabs specifically. Third, language and heritage speaking are a prominent part of exploring queer Arab identity and expression, and the "queer potential" of Arabic song lyrics is an important aspect of such expression. This thesis dissects this subject through a critical, interdisciplinary approach, bringing in concepts from queer theory and Middle East studies to further explore it.

Regional studies and queer theory studies scholars have widely taken up the topic of sexuality; this makes defining such terms quite unique to each region that the scholars deliberate. In this thesis, I interact specifically with different scholars' texts pertaining to these terms within the MENA region. Through this interaction, I find that the scholars discussed below are passionately driven by the notion that the explicit nature of Eurocentric ideas of sexuality is inherently harmful, especially to Arabs with fluid sexualities; in this literature review, I dive into this view. I also take the time to define and break down what "Orientalism" is, and how, historically, it's used as a tool for further erasure of the fluidity of sexuality by Eurocentricism. Then, I assess the importance of language to queer Arab expression, and how examining the "queer potential" of Arabic song lyrics is an important aspect of such expression.

First: the inherently harmful nature of Eurocentricism on the fluidity of sexuality

In general, Eurocentric notions of sexuality are harmful in nature towards all subjects with fluid sexualities, not just openly queer Arabs. A form of this is shown through several revolutionary queer theory scholars' works, with one of them being Eve Sedgwick. Born of the constant rise of homophobia on many fronts in the 1980s, Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) comes into play to revolutionize the field of queer theory and advance academic knowledge on sexuality by bringing in its societal, as well as political, impacts. Sedgwick describes "coming out of the closet" as a "defining structure for gay oppression" and overall inherently violent because, after metaphorically leaving "the closet" and putting politicized terms such as "homosexual" and "minority" onto subjects with fluid sexualities, their identity is then met with a lot of societal backlash (Sedgwick 71, 76, 80, 81). Sedgwick specifically shows this by providing the following example: creating defining categories, such as "homosexual" and "minority," creates a "homosexual panic" and gives birth to defense tactics used by heterosexual subjects to separate themselves from what's sometimes called a "gay" or "homosexual" subject and, ultimately, isolates them in society (18, 19). Sedgwick is not the only scholar who's taken note of this.

Michael Bartos's *A Typology of the Meanings of Sex between Men* (1993) further reiterates this by exploring the fluidity of sexuality through the MSM (Men who have Sex with other Men) culture in Australia in the 1990s. He also analyzes how the heteronormative structures that these men live under constricts the fluidity of their sexuality. Bartos states that male Australian subjects are disinterested in labeling their fluidity because, to them, there is no correlation between their self identification and their sexual activities (Bartos 27). Because of heteronormativity and the patriarchal systems that they operate under, what's more important to

them is their monetary gains and their role as men, fathers, or dominant subjects in society (27). Therefore, these labels are pushed to the back of their minds, while their statuses in society come to the forefront. Specifically, similar to Sedgwick's point, associating explicit labels—such as "homosexuality"—on the Australian MSM subjects creates a "homosexual panic" because, to them, they equate "heterosexuality" with being *normal*, and "homosexuality" with being *deviant*, or *abnormal* (27). Here, Bartos is stating that such an action creates a thought process that can "manifest itself in the desire to eradicate homosexuality" by the Australian MSM subjects (27). Overall, Bartos's work emphasizes the fluidity of Australian MSM subjects' sexuality; it also highlights how explicitly labeling their sexual identities creates societal backlash due to the heteronormative, Eurocentric structures that they are living under. This, in turn, re-emphasizes how these Eurocentric notions of sexuality are inherently harmful and limiting to subjects with fluid sexualities.

Similarly to Sedgwick and Bartos, Michael Rocke's *Forbidden Friendships: Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (1996) provides a historical analysis—specifically, during the Renaissance era—on an MSM-like culture in Florence, Italy and further reiterates how, even historically, labeling this fluidity as "homosexuality" is inherently harmful. Rocke, a scholar specializing in gender and sexualities, contextualizes the era by stating that, before the 14th Century, Italy—then labeled the "mother of sodomy"—bared witness to many Italian male subjects having sex with other men; however, once this practice was explicitly labeled as "sodomy" by the Catholic Church, it became a punishable sin (Rocke 3-6). While this didn't necessarily hinder what Rocke labels as a "thriving underground of homosexual activity" for the Italian male subject, limiting their sexuality to an explicit definition, rather than taking into account the fluidity of it, places them into an inherently harmful societal

position. This position leads to them being specifically labeled as "homosexual" (and are, therefore, seen as "deviant" and worthy of punishments) (6-11). Rocke's overarching point on the subject further reiterates what both Sedgwick states and Bartos's research in Australia asserts: that limiting the fluidity of sexualities to something that is explicitly labeled leads to a societal separation that harms the subjects whose sexualities are fluid.

David M. Halperin's *How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality* (2002) furthers the above scholars' points by exploring the patriarchal influence on such separation. Halperin writes of this underlying notion in Eurocentric history[2] that a "conventionally" heterosexual, or "masculine," male subject who participates in an MSM-like culture with a "subordinate"[3] partner is simply performing a dominant sexual act that doesn't deviate from the "conventional male role" of society that the subject already possesses (Halperin 115). Halperin classifies this as a "non-homosexual" homosexuality, rather than its more explicitly defined counterpart: the "abnormal," or the "deviant sexual inversion," which is viewed negatively in a patriarchal society (115). In framing the act of penetration as a patriarchal, inherently masculine act, Halperin then separates the MSM subject from the feminine (or "inferior"), and highlights how, historically, hierarchical power is what ultimately concerns the MSM subject, rather than their fluid sexual acts (similarly to Bartos's research) (115-117, 121). "Same-sex erotic preference," Halperin states, "ought not to be equated with the whole of gay sexuality," as MSM subjects separate themselves from "homosexuals," which are—as previously stated above—historically seen as sexual "deviants" and worthy of harm and punishment (115-117, 121). Ultimately, the fluidity of their sexuality, and the lack of defining it explicitly, shielded MSM subjects from

[2] It is important to note that this notion—as Halperin describes—is patriarchal, and it equates power with penetration. This re-emphasizes heteronormativity, which subjects both women and people with fluid sexualities as "inferior" to the "penetrator." This is included, in part, to re-emphasize the inherently harmful nature of Eurocentrism on those who don't identify with a specific label; it is also included to highlight how inherently harmful Eurocentricism and the patriarchy is on women.

[3] Here, Halperin uses the word to mean the person who is getting anally "penetrated," rather than being the "penetrator."

harm.[4] Limiting this fluidity, and explicitly defining it, is—as seen in all four scholars' work—inherently harmful. Additionally, this limitation expands beyond just subjects in Europe and North America[5]; it also harms Arabs with fluid sexualities. The next section further explores this.

Second: Orientalism and its limitations on fluid sexualities

Arabs with fluid sexualities have been marginalized by Eurocentric ideas of sexuality through "Orientalism." "Orientalism," a term coined by Palestinian-American academic and scholar Edward Said in 1978, refers to a "too vague" and "general" Eurocentric descriptor of "the Orient" (or, someone from the MENA region) (Said 10, 11). This is done as a way of dominating—as well as having authority over—subjects from the region (Said 10, 11). He describes the settler from a European/North American region (specifically, he notes them as English, French, or American) as "the Occident," and states that the relationship between "the Orient" and "the Occident"[6] is a relationship of "power" and "domination," with "the Occident" being "superior" to "the Orient" in ideas and intellectualism (12, 13, 22, 23). This, in turn, by going off of Said's logic, makes "the Orient" "inferior" in "the Occident's" eyes. Ultimately, that creates an imbalance of power in both the global and political sphere for "the Orient," as they are then seen as "backwards," while "the Occident" is seen as more fit to present the global command and influence. In the case for the subjects being studied in this thesis, "the Orient" are

[4] It is important to note that this isn't the case for everyone who engages in "non-heterosexual" sexual activities, and that there are those in current society who wish to identify with a specific label. However, these labels are derived from Eurocentricism and patriarchal ideas of what it means to be "non-heterosexual"; while they may benefit some on their journey to identity exploration, they are ultimately harmful due to the politically charged involvement of the dominating regions that these terms derive from. This is why it is important to take into account the political structures of the MENA region and understand that, while some choose to identify with these limited English terms, others choose not to for the sake of shielding themselves from these inherently harmful politicized connections to these terms.

[5] I use the term "Europe and North America" as an identifier of the region in which Eurocentricism deems "superior" to other places in the world, such as the MENA region. It is used to highlight the politically charged involvement of the region onto the subjects that I am discussing in my thesis. However, these terms are not intended to be used as a reflection of the entire region's values and ideas surrounding Eurocentricism, as Europe/North America is vast and multicultural.

[6]Throughout this section, I sometimes use "Orient" and "Occident." This is done as a substitute for the hegemonic power created through Eurocentrism that paints the MENA region as "inferior" to what Edward Said calls "the West." When using these words, I am not generalizing Europe/North America and the MENA regions as such. This is not an umbrella term for the region. Rather, they are terms describing the power structures that have been enacted socially and politically throughout history. Again, it is important to note that both regions are vast and multicultural, and that their political and power structures don't reflect every living being in the region.

Arabs with fluid sexualities, as well as queer Arabs, and "the Occident" are the Eurocentric notions surrounding the region in which they live their everyday lives. In other words, Arabs with fluid sexualities are seen as "helpless" and "inferior" by Eurocentric ideas of the MENA region, which paint it as "backwards" and unfit to create space for those who identify as "non-heterosexual" or "queer" (or those who don't identify with a specific Eurocentric definition or "label," either). This, then, allows for Eurocentric retaliation against the region in the name of being the "savior" to the region's "backwardness." However, this retaliation ends up, ultimately, harming Arabs with fluid sexualities and queer Arabs. This is seen through both Khaled El-Rouayheb's *Before Homosexuality in the Arabic-Islamic World, 1500-1800* and Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs*.

Said's theorization of "the Orient" versus "the Occident" isn't lost on scholars who come across the subject of Arabs with fluid sexualities. Khaled El-Rouayheb's work is one example of this. El-Rouayheb states that pre-19th Century Arabic-Islamic culture was very much indulgent in an MSM-like culture; oftentimes, physical acts—both sexual and romantic—were found to be a normal occurrence between men, and weren't seen as a "serious transgression," or a sin, until British and French government penal codes against homosexuality were introduced and implemented in 1885, which then influenced the Arab-Islamic world to follow suit (El-Rouayheb 6-8). Scholar and theorist Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* further touches on this point. He brings in both Said and El-Rouayheb to dissect how Orientalism affects the ways in which Arabs view, define, and interact with sexuality and sexual desires, stating that Orientalist depictions of Arabs continue to negatively affect their sexualities and desires both historically and now. Specifically, with bringing in the Victorianism era (the Nineteenth Century) and using El-Rouyaheb's earlier points, Massad points out how what Said calls "the Occident" saw "the

Orient's" "sexual licentiousness" as abnormal and backwards, yet in today's world, "the Occident" attacks the "the Orient's" current "alleged repression of sexual freedoms" as a way of painting the MENA region as "backwards"[7] (Massad 15-17, 30, 37). His own coined term—the "gay international"[8]—further asserts the earlier points from the previous section that explicit definitions of sexuality are not only limiting the fluidity of sexuality, but are also harmful to Arabs with fluid sexualities.

The "gay international" is brought in as a way of critiquing what Said calls the "Orientalist impulse" to repress fluid sexualities and sexual desires that don't fit within its definitions, or its "sexual epistemology" (160-163). In other words, Massad is arguing that, through the explicit implementation of discourse surrounding homosexuality and queer identities, the "gay international" is forcing a Eurocentric "binary" onto Arab subjects who are uninterested in limiting their fluidity to a specific, explicit label (174, 188). This, ultimately, allows the MENA region to then retaliate through implementations against them—usually governmental or political—that would have otherwise not existed (174, 188). Massad uses the example of the Queen Borat arrests in Egypt—where Egyptian men who were participating in same-sex relations with foreign (European, American) men were arrested after being caught—to highlight this point. Specifically, he argues that, without the European and North American region's[9] scholarly and media involvement in the aftermath of the arrests, the Egyptian government likely wouldn't have retaliated by implementing harsher surveillance and punishments onto Egyptians with fluid, non-labeled sexualities (181-189, 190). Ultimately,

[7] He even highlights the hypocrisy by pointing out examples of attitudes on subjects outside of sexuality (specifically, how some countries within Europe/North America—such as the United States—have an incessant need to condemn honor killings occurring in countries within the MENA region, while simultaneously dismissing the fact that the majority of homicide towards women in the country is oftentimes done at the hands of their male significant other) (Massad 15-17, 30, 37).

[8] The term "gay international" is described in chapter 3 of Massad's work as the European and North American region's effort to implement its explicit definitions of sexuality and sexual desires onto the MENA region (160-163).

[9] Again, I use "European and North American region" here as a reference to the politically charged involvement of the region that paints the MENA region as inferior; I am not, however, insinuating that the entirety of Europe/North America is representative of this. The region is vast and multicultural.

Massad argues that Arabs with fluid sexualities are harmed by the "gay international" because it assumes that Eurocentric defining labels of sexuality are a necessity in the MENA region, when in reality, such notions are ultimately limiting and harmful.

It is important to note that, while Massad's work is revolutionary for its time, it has been—and continues to be—criticized for its now-dated ideas on the subject. Andrew Gayed's *Queer World Making* (2024), which is a sociological approach to identifying sexualities in the MENA region, touches on this. Gayed approaches the subject of sexualities and sexual relations by questioning whether Massad's arguments take into account the role of "modernity"[10] in the MENA region (Gayed 15). Specifically, Gayed states that "modernity," as well as "modernism," highlights the influence of "historical discourses of sexual liberation" on the "parameters of contemporary gender identity and desire" (16). Therefore, Gayed is arguing that "queering locally"[11] is superior to Massad's methods because it allows for more productivity when dissecting openly queer Arabs in the MENA region (16-17). However, while I don't intend to invalidate Gayed's methodology—as I, myself, find it rooted in modern ideas of approaching the experiences of openly queer Arab subjects, and discourse surrounding them, in a more validating and authentic way—I must state that Massad's "gay international" remains prevalent in the discourse. To be more thorough, I believe that Massad's work further highlights that Eurocentric ideas are still creating generalized and explicit definitions of sexualities that affect those living in the MENA region identifying with such sexualities. This, in turn, limits their expression. This is why it is crucial to point out the importance of language, itself, when exploring the fluidity and vastness of openly queer Arabs. Scholars Brian James Baer, Sara Mourad, Marwan Kaabour, and Mejdulene Bernard Shomali echo this argument. This next section dives into their works.

[10] This is a term that Gayed describes as a method used by "the Occident" to "colonize" different societies as a way of "advancing" them (Gayed 15).
[11] This is a term that, as Gayed claims, permits "geographical flexibility" when exploring the history of different regions (16-17).

Third: non-Eurocentric queer Arab expression and "queer potential"

Brian James Baer, a translation studies scholar, encapsulates queer theory and its history, sexuality, and how language surrounding it is translated throughout different cultures in *Queer Theory and Translation Studies* (2020). Like Massad, Baer—with the help of many scholars in the field—points out Eurocentricism's influence on language surrounding sexuality. This, in turn, influences how it is talked about and interpreted in other parts of the world, such as the MENA region. Specifically, Baer states that, in Arabic, and studies surrounding the language, fluidity within sexuality and sexual desires has existed in poetry, historical archives, and literary works, but that English translations of such works interfered with how the fluidity written in those archives was ultimately interpreted (Baer 10-13). Specifically, Baer brings in Richard Burton's translation of *Arabian Nights* (1885-88), and his assertion of the "Sotadic Zone" (13).[12] This is a personal interpretation by Burton that—ultimately—interferes with the authenticity of the translations of *Arabian Nights*. When explaining why emphasis on language, and authentic translations of language, is important for dissecting sexualities in different regions, Baer brings in Paul B. Preciado's *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* (2000). In it, Preciado states: "sexualities are like languages: they are complex systems of communication and reproduction of life…like languages, sexualities can be learned. Multiple languages can be spoken" (12). Burton's interpretation of *Arabian Nights* ultimately fails to follow this logic, as it does not take into account the complexity of the Arabic language, which, in turn, erases how the fluidity of sexualities is described in Arabic works. Baer's work, although brief in touching on the English language's influence on how the MENA region is interpreted, is important to include because it reiterates earlier points, while also adding onto them. Those points are as follows: Eurocentric

[12] This is a term Burton coined to describe a zone within areas outside of the European and North American region where sexual fluidity was believed to have been common (Baer 13).

interpretations of language and sexuality have, undoubtedly, implemented explicit linguistic identifications of sexuality onto the MENA region; this is inherently harmful to both the fluidity of how sexuality is defined in the region, as well as how openly queer Arabs express themselves. Sara Mourad's work further reveals how such implementation can be inherently violent on openly queer Arab subjects who explicitly identify with their sexuality, as it directly influences the way they interact with such identities (through the usage of English, rather than Arabic), and ultimately limits their expression.

Sara Mourad's "Queering the Mother Tongue" looks at how colonialism in the MENA region has created a culture of separation and lack of Arabic verbal/written words for queer Arab identity and expression. Mourad does this by using Lebanon as an example; due to colonialism and the establishment of Eurocentric norms in the region, many queer Lebanese people grow up learning not just Arabic, but also English and French (Mourad 2533, 2534). This, ultimately, limits queer Lebanese people linguistically when it comes to learning about their identities through their native tongue[13] (2534). Mourad reiterates Massad's argument by directly quoting it in the text, stating that Eurocentric linguistic categories of sexuality aren't universal, but are, rather, a violent way of universalizing Eurocentric depictions of such identities and subjecting queer Arabs to the backlash and retaliation that such depictions can inflict upon them (Massad 41; Mourad 2536). Due to this, there is a struggle for words when it comes to scholarly accounts of queer Arabs. Mourad uses Fran Martin's study on Eurocentricism's influence on Taiwanese queer language[14] to highlight this point. Specifically, Martin states that "politically correct" Eurocentric translations of Taiwanese queer words[15] fail to take into account the cultural context

[13] Mourad asserts that Arabs' native tongue *is* Arabic, *not* English or French—which she deems as the language of the colonizers (Mourad 2534).
[14] I use the term "queer language" here as a descriptor of what queer people in Taiwan use to converse with one another; while this term is derived from Eurocentric linguistic ideas of "queer" (which is something that this thesis critiques), I continue to use it due to the limitations of working with the English language and English, in general.
[15] An example of this is the word *tongzhi*, which has several different translations—with only one of them being the word "queer"—, which, ultimately, makes its English interpretation limited (2537).

of the country (2537). Mourad then mirrors this with the way Eurocentricism fails to take into account queer Arab expression(2537).[16] This failure can then harm the development of the queer Arabic language, as well as openly queer Arabs' ability to express their queerness through their native tongues. Marwan Kaabour's work further reiterates this.

Marwan Kaabour's *Queer Arab Glossary* (2024) not only highlights Eurocentricism's looming presence in its descriptors of queer Arab identity today, but also expresses frustrations over it. The glossary, which is composed of Arabic words, phrases, and interpretations of Arab queerness originating within the MENA region, is Kaabour's way of retaliating against these Eurocentric expressions of sexuality. It also provides a linguistic representation of the queer Arab community using Arabic itself. This is a way for Kaabour to illuminate the diverse forms of the Arabic language, while simultaneously arguing against the Eurocentric notion that the MENA region doesn't hold space for queerness. The glossary, in Kaabour's words, "allows for young queer people" in the region "to have a footing firmly fixed in ancestral past," and for queer Arabs to use the linguistic tools of the region's past—rather than Eurocentric traditions of what it means to be "queer"—to navigate their queerness (Kaabour 9-13). Mourad's piece and Kaabour's glossary are, in a way, a work of retaliation against the "gay international"; through their pieces, they actively argue for an Arabic-language alternative to the generalized, Eurocentric depictions of sexuality and sexual desires. This allows for the appreciation of what Mourad calls queer Arabs' native tongues, while also forming a space where queer Arab expression can be found beyond the limitations that Eurocentric-specific definitions of it places onto it. Mejdulene Bernard Shomali's essay in Kaabour's glossary highlights this point by bringing in what is called a "queer potential" interpretation of Arabic lyrics.

[16] This mirroring points back to Baer's argument against Burton's *Arabian Nights* that the previous section discusses. Again, we see here how English interpretations of different languages simplify the complexity of those languages. The same type of simplification is applied to Arabs' interpretations of "sexuality" and "queerness."

In the personal essays section of *Queer Arab Glossary*, Shomali, a queer Palestinian-American scholar, recounts the first time she listened to Fairuz's "**Al Bostah**" and realized that the legendary Lebanese singer was singing to a woman.[17] She recounts the lyrical story of Fairuz riding the bus and "yearning for a black-eyed woman named 'aliyah'" (Kaabour 141). "I heard her longing," Shomali had described in her essay, "and found in it my own" (141). Shomali recognizes that it is common, in Arabic songs, for the singer and the one being sung about to both be of the same gender (142). However, Shomali still recognizes the "queer possibility" that the song creates for queer Arab women listening to, and resonating with, the song (142). In this way, Shomali is looking at the lyrics of the song through the "queer lens."

The "queer lens" is derived from "queer theory," a term that Italian scholar Teresa De Lauretis coined in the 90s. De Lauretis used the term as a way of diverting from the "standard way" that queer people were then described ("gay," "lesbian," "homosexual," etc.) (De Lauretis iv). Her reasoning for this is because these terms were used as a "standard currency" and a way for identifying "specific lifestyles" and "sexualities, sexual practices, communities, issues, publications, and discourses" that associated lesbian women with male homosexuality in the heteronormative world (v). Therefore, "queer theory" as a term was created "in an effort to divert" from this association, while also taking away the assumptions that come with the "standard" terms that have already been set, monetized, and used by society (v). "Queer" is used as a way to reclaim identity, while also rejecting traditional and rigid societal norms (v). "Queer lens," then, is the diversion of the heteronormative lens; it is a way of looking at the world of media, art, and history through a non-rigid, non-traditional and non-heterosexual lens.

[17] Here, Fairuz is being used more as the character in the story being told by the song's lyrics; Shomali's intent, as shown later on in the paragraph, isn't to assume that the singer herself is singing romantically about a woman, but, rather that there is a "queer potential" to the song due to her singing it. In other words, hearing this song's romantic lyrics being sung *by* a woman *for* another woman is what resonates with her the most as someone who's queer and Arab.

Shomali uses the queer lens to re-examine the meaning behind the song "**Al Bostah**." Her intention isn't to say that the song is "fundamentally queer," but, rather, it is to divert from the heteronormative view[18] that "the *intention* of heterosexuality overrides the *potential* of queerness" in the lyrics (142). This is important when analyzing lyrics written and sung in the Arabic language, as it allows for a better understanding of how openly queer Arab singers and songwriters examine the world and—in turn—examine the songs that they grew up listening to. Echoing Baer's, Mourad's, and Kaabour's work, Shomali's interpretation of Fairuz's song enriches the conversation surrounding queer Arab expression, as it is a direct example of how complex Arabic lyrics can birth "potentially queer" interpretations for queer Arabs to resonate with. The analysis section of this thesis expands on that.

As this literature review shows, there is a fluidity to sexualities, especially within the MENA region, that is being limited when operating under the explicit, Eurocentric definitions of such sexualities. Likewise, terms like "coming out of the closet," "gay," "homosexual," etc., are derived from a Eurocentric idea of sexuality that is inherently harmful to people with such fluidity in the MENA region. Thus, categorizing this fluidity in a definitive way reiterates the harmful narratives of "Orientalism" that Edward Said brings up. Therefore, it is important to take into account the importance of language, and especially the Arabic language, when it comes to working with—and talking about—the fluidity of sexuality in the MENA region.

[18] This is a view that, Shomali argues, most people use as an argument against the examination of the "homoeortic potential" of songs such as this one (Kaabour 142).

3. Methodology, Theoretical Framework, and Research Design

Introduction

This thesis explores the ways in which openly queer Arab musicians use Arabic lyrics to express their identity. The following section looks at the methods used to support this exploration, as well as the breakdown of each of the following two sections: research design; data selection, collection, and analysis. Overall, this section gives an overview of the next chapter of this work, and explains how I contextualized and analyzed both the "queer potential"[19] of Arabic song lyrics and music sung by openly queer Arab musicians.

Research Design

This research followed a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, with timeless Arabic pop songs and queer Arab musicians being the case study. This is interdisciplinary through the use of ethnomusicology; I approach this topic by dissecting how music, in and of itself, is multi-faceted and complex. I use Thomas Torino's research to help with this.

Thomas Turino's *Music as Social Life* (2008) simplifies the complexities of music by stating that it is a splintered form of art that brings together what it means to be human. In his introduction, he offers a "theoretical exploration" to the meanings of music, and an introduction to the "why and how" of music's importance to different cultural environments (Turino 1, 2). In other words, he states that music forms and sustains different social groups by communicating their "spiritual and emotional" connections to the world, while also driving "fundamental aspects of social life," such as "political movements" and "people's understanding of themselves and their identities" (1, 2). This theoretical approach—one that is rooted in the vines of music that weave through the trees of people's lives and makes them whole—is one that is crucial to this

[19] In other words: I work off of the literature review—specifically, Shomali's essay in Kaabour's work—as one of the frameworks to how I looked at the musicians' song lyrics.

research because queer Arab musicians' identities sprout in their art form (or, more specifically, in the Arabic lyrics they write). Specifically, when looking at Hamed Sinno's work with *Mashrou Leila* and Bashar Murad's song in the latter half of my analysis, I use Turino's theory of music to better understand how their song lyrics reflect their understanding of themselves as queer Arabs. As mentioned in the literature review, terms such as "gay," "homosexual," "queer," etc., as Sedgwick calls it in *Epistemology of the Closet*, are Eurocentric and limiting to the fluidity of sexuality and to queer Arab identity. Therefore, music—and, more specifically, Arabic lyrics—in its complexities and nuances, serves as crucial world-building for queer Arabs' identities and self-expression. These forms of self-expression, inspired by and built off of timeless Arab pop music with what I identify as "queer potential," allow for openly queer Arab musicians, like Sinno and Murad, to live out their truths through their own native tongue. This point—the importance of music in relation to one's identity—is also explored by Turino.

Turino states that music, along with "dance, festivals, and other public expressive cultural practice" are primarily used to "articulate the collective identities" that he finds to be the foundation of survival (2). Queer Arab musicians, similarly to what Turino states, use their art form as a way of not only connecting with their identities, but also for surviving the world. Their music is their way of being "part of the community" (in this case, both the queer community and Arab community) and it is a key to forming their identities in a world that actively works to suppress them (2). Through music, queer Arabs can experience what Turino calls "a feeling of oneness with others" (2, 3). Whether it be to feel closer to their families or fellow queer people, queer Arab musicians find the key of self-expression and advocating for one's identity through their music. This research highlights that, while also celebrating these artists.

When researching Arabic lyrics and queer Arab musicians, I use Torino's framework of relating music to one's identity and sense of self to explore this. I begin by bringing in timeless Arab pop songs—songs that queer Arab musicians grew up listening to and are actively inspired by when creating their own music—to explore how the lyrics' "queer potential" helps to further build that sense of self-exploration and identity for them. I then directly analyze queer Arab musicians' own song lyrics and their complexities; similarly to Turino, I focus on how their lyrics—written in Arabic, their native tongue—help in serving as a form of self-expression and identity.

The Arabic language, itself, is a gendered language. Therefore, romantic songs' lyrics are often addressing the lover "in the generic masculine," where the lover can be sung to "by male or female singers" interchangeably (Racy 149). This is an important point I keep in mind when exploring this topic; I look at how—due to its gendered nature—the Arabic language allows for lyrics in pop songs to produce "potentially queer" themes. Similarly, this gendered nature of the language acts as a tool for openly queer Arab musicians to express their identity through their music. Since I am focusing on queer Arab musicians' experiences in this thesis, I also find it crucial to highlight their perspective on the interpretation of lyrics in Arab pop music. Therefore, I use De Laurentis's "queer lens" section in the literature review as the lens of exploration for the Arabic lyrics I am analyzing.

Data Selection, Collection, and Analysis

The data I selected and analyzed for the first section of the analysis comes mainly from timeless pop songs in the MENA region. These are songs sung by artists from the "Golden Age" of Arabic music,[20] such as Fairuz and Abd El Halim Hafez. I also selected popular artists from the early twenty-first century, as well as current century, like Ilham al-Madfai, Hussain

[20] This is referring to the most popular age of music, which is the mid-to-late twentieth century, in the MENA region.

Al-Jassmi, and Amr Diab. Ultimately, I chose to analyze these artists because they are well-known in different parts of the region and, therefore, they felt the most appropriate for this research. I also refrained from using other artists[21] that I researched as their songs strayed from the goal of the analysis's[22] first section: the exploration of the "queer potential" of Arabic song lyrics.

For the latter section of the analysis, I focused on researching openly queer Arab artists. This section felt significantly more limited, as most of the artists I found sung in languages other than Arabic.[23] While these artists' stories are equally important, my analysis focuses solely on the Arabic language and how Arabic lyrics help with queer Arab expression. Therefore, I ultimately chose to focus on *Mashrou Leila*'s Hamed Sinno and Bashar Murad for this thesis, as they work with the Arabic language to produce Arabic lyrics that talk about their queer identity and expression.

The ultimate data that was chosen includes a total of eleven songs by Arab musicians, ranging from the mid-to-late twentieth century to now, that discuss themes of romance, love, and—in the latter half of the analysis—the complexities of such a subject when intertwining with one's identity and self-expression. This research brings in well-known—as well as iconic—artists from the region, like Fairuz, Abd El Halim Hafez, Ilham Al-Madfai, Hussain Al-Jassmi, and Amr Diab to analyze the gendered nature of the Arabic language. It also dives into how these gendered terms are used interchangeably between both male and female singers,

[21] For example, I looked at Warda Al Jazairia, Nancy Ajram, and Kadim Al Saher, amongst many others who are influential in the world of Arabic music.
[22] Specifically, both Warda Al Jazairia and Nancy Ajram sang songs with lyrics in the masculine form. Therefore, the most common interpretation for their songs is heterosexual. Similarly, Kadim Al Saher worked with Nizar Al Qabani to produce his love songs, and the poet often wrote for him in the feminine form. However, it can be argued that their songs can be interpreted as "queer" if sung by someone of a different gender, but these songs are widely known to be associated with these artists. Therefore, including them would stray too far away from the goal of the analysis.
[23] For example, one of my favorite artists I found through researching for this project is Amira Jazeera, a queer Palestinian-American whose songs are all in English. As this research's purpose is to highlight the fluidity of the Arabic language and how it creates a "queer potential" for song lyric interpretation, using songs in English defeats that purpose.

creating a "queer potential" for the song's romantic narrative that is then seen more clearly in songs written by openly queer Arab artists, like Hamed Sinno and Bashar Murad.

The research is based on the following data: Arabic song lyrics of "Golden Age" songs, pop songs, and songs written in Arabic by openly queer Arab musicians. I dissect the lyrics of each artist's songs, and emphasize the following: where the gendered language takes place in each lyric (using translation and transliteration interchangeably to emphasize it), as well as how, thematically, the lyrics—when read through the "queer lens"—have a theme that is "potentially queer." Then I look at the songs written by two openly queer Arab artists, Hamed Sinno and Bashar Murad, to explore how the gendered language, and its "queer potential," is used as a tool for self-expression and identity. This will be shown in the data that was analyzed.

The data was analyzed through a qualitative, interdisciplinary research approach. For my framework, I use content analysis to dissect the lyrics of songs from the "Golden Age" era, the current era, and songs written by queer Arab musicians. In this way, I am doing two things: dissecting the queer potential of songs, as well as examining the ways in which music written in Arabic helps shape queer Arab identity and allows for queer Arabs to express their sexuality. This framework is beneficial because—overall—it both highlights the queer Arab experience through music, while also diverting from exploring popular songs in the region through a Eurocentric lens. This is done through music, specifically, by dissecting lyrics and also highlighting Turino's approaches to music as a form of self-expression, identity, and survival in the world, De Lauretis's queer theory approach to looking at the world through a "queer lens," and Shomali's approach to analyzing the "queer potential" of Arabic song lyrics.

4. Analysis

First: an analysis of Arabic songs and their "queer potential"

Similarly to the fluidity of sexuality, there is a fluidity to the Arabic language through its gendered nature. Unlike the English language, the word *you* can take on a feminine or masculine form in the Arabic language. In songs with romantic lyrics, the lover is seen as either male or female depending on which form is used. When the gender of the singer is male, and the lyrics of the song contain the masculine *you* form, the "queer potentiality" of the song is thus born. Similarly, when the gender of the singer is female, and the lyrics contain the feminine *you* form, the song can be read as "queer." This is where the fluidity of meaning-making comes in for the Arabic lyrics being used in those songs.[24]

Shomali is only one of many whose hearts were touched by the powerhouse of Arab music that is Fairuz (specifically, in her essay for Marwan Kaabour's *Queer Arab Glossary*, she discusses this love for Fairuz's "Al Bostah" that this thesis includes in the literature review section (142)). The legendary Lebanese singer, whose famous songs transcend past her musical prime and continue to have an impact on music today, is known in the MENA region as "عصفورة الشرق," or "Bird of the East." Her signature tone—coined as the "voice" of the MENA region—makes her one of "*the* most respected and influential musicians of the Arabic language" (Torres). The singer, whose powerful vocals invoke a wide range of emotions from fans whenever she belts, has two songs with lyrics that not only use the feminine form of *you*, but are also directly referring to a woman lover: "**Al Bostah** (البوسطة)" and "**The Shalabiya Girl** (البنت الشلبية)." This thesis analyzes both songs and how viewing their lyrics from a "queer lens" can

[24] It is important to reiterate here that the sexuality of the singer themselves is not the focus of the argument that this thesis is making. Rather, it is, as Shomali's essay suggests, the diversion from ""the *intention* of heterosexuality" overriding "the *potential* of queerness" that the songs create for queer Arab listeners (Kaabour 142). Through seeing the "queer potential" of the meaning behind the lyrics of these songs, we are able to divert from the heternormative lens that these lyrics are often dissected under.

help in determining the "potentially queer" romantic undertones that serve as the plot of the songs.[25]

"**Al Bostah**"—released in 1979 and written by Fairuz's son, famous composer Ziad Rahbani—is a fun, romantic song that uses the Levantine dialect and starts off with a *mawwal* (موال)[26]. The *mawwal* contrasts the overall up-beat, romantic, and—at times, comedic—style that Fairuz delivers for the rest of the song. Lyrically, the *mawaal* starts with a fixation on a pair of eyes:

"موعود بعيونِك أنا موعود،

و شو قطعت كرمالن ضيع وجرود

فانتي, انتي عيونِك سود

ومنِك عارفة شو بيعملوا فيّ

العيون السود"[27]

(*Anghami*)

"*I am promised by your eyes, promised,*

And if only you knew how many villages I crossed for them,

You, your black eyes,

You don't know, what they do to me,

***your black eyes*"**

(*Lyrics Translate*)

[25] This thesis does this by looking at the original Arabic lyrics in the website *Anghami*, as well as the English lyrics translated in the website *Lyrics Translate*.

[26] A *mawwal* is a traditional Arabic poetry-style of singing that is performed with powerful vocals and that captures the listener's attention from the first note sung (Faris).

[27] It is important to note here that the word "موعود" (*maw-oud*) is in the masculine form, alluding to the singer being male and singing to a female lover named Aliyah. However, Fairuz is widely known for being the "voice" of the song. This makes her singing it allude to a "potentially queer" romantic theme for the song that further iterates the fluidity of "meaning" that the Arabic language creates in song lyrics.

The *mawwal* here serves as the entrance to the story of the song, with the singer[28] expressing just how infatuated she is with the person's black eyes and the journey she took to get to them. The feminine form of the word *you* is used a lot in the *mawwal.*[29] This reveals to the listener that the person being sung about is a girl.[30]

Then, after the *mawwal*, the song picks up in beat and rhythm. Lyrically, the usage of feminine words continues, and it is revealed to the listener that the singer is on a hectic bus (or *bostah*) journey to Village Tanourine. There are people singing, laughing, and making a scene, and—amidst the chaos—the singer repeatedly emphasizes that she can only think about one person with beautiful, black eyes named *Aliyah* (عليا). The usage of the *kasra*[31] to re-emphasize the feminine forms of the words is shown continuously in the verses. For example:

"ع هدير البوسطة الكانت نقلتنا

من ضيعة حملايا على ضيعة تنورين

تذكرتِك يا عليا، وتذكرت عيونِك

يخرب بيت عيونِك، يا عليا، شو حلوين!"

"نحنا كنا طالعين، طالعين ومش دافعين

ساعة نهديلو الباب،

و ساعة نهدي الركاب

وهيدا اللي هو و مرتو، عالباب وداخِت مرتو

[28] "The singer" here (and throughout the rest of my analysis) is used to refer to the singer singing romantic lyrics about a lover. However, it isn't to directly assume that Fairuz herself (or any of the other artists whose songs I analyze) is singing about this lover. Rather, it is to emphasize that the gender of the singer plays a role in how the song's lyrics are being interpreted/read. Again, this is only a "potentially queer" reading of the song, its lyrics, and how the gender of the singer can influence how it can be interpreted as "potentially queer."

[29] For example: In the first line, the word "بعيونِك," which translates to "with *your* eyes," has an accent mark underneath the letter **ن**, also known as a *kasra*. A *kasra*, when applied to an Arabic letter, produces an ***ee*** sound (similar to the letter **ي**). This ***ee*** sound, when added to the lyric "*with your eyes*", makes the *your* feminine.

[30] Similarly, in the third line, with the lyric "عيونك سود," (*your* black eyes), the *kasra* is underneath the **ن** again. Also, the word "أنتي," meaning *you*, ends with the letter **ي** in this verse ("أنتي"), which makes it feminine. Finally, in the fourth line, the lyrics "ومنِك عارفة," which translates to "*you* don't know," not only has the *kasra* underneath the **ن** for the word "منِك" (dialect way of saying "*you* don't"), but it also has an added letter **ة** at the end of the word "عارف," ("*know*"), giving it an ***eh*** sound that makes the word feminine.

[31] An accent mark (.) used to emphasize the ***ee*** sound in Arabic pronouns, making them into the feminine form.

وحياتِك كان بيتركها تطلع وحدها ع تنورين

لو بيشوف عيونِك، يا عليا،

شو حلوين!"

(*Anghami*)

"*On the roaring of the bus, which was taking us*

from the village of Himalaya to the village of Tanourine

I remembered you, Aliyah, and I remembered your eyes,

and damn your eyes, Aliyah, how pretty they are!

We were riding, riding without paying

Sometimes, we would hold the door for the driver,

and sometimes, we would hold the passengers for him

And the one with his wife, his wife got dizzy and fainted

I swear to you, he would have left her to leave alone to Tanourine,

if only he saw your eyes, oh Aliyah,

and how pretty they are!"

(*Lyrics Translate*)

While the lyrics don't explicitly reveal a romantic connection between the singer and Aliyah, the implications of romance are certainly there. First, as shown in the above lyrics, the singer is constantly thinking about Aliyah and her pretty, black eyes. She re-emphasizes the beauty of them, and how enchanted she is by them, after almost every verse in the song. In the fifth and sixth lines, she even claims that if the married man on the bus were to see Aliyah's eyes, he would be so entranced by their beauty that he would leave his wife for her. When

looking at the song from a "queer lens," the fluidity of the song's meaning becomes clearer. Thus, the song being interpreted as a song for a woman sung by another woman becomes possible. Whether they are together or not isn't the objective; rather, as Shomali stated, what makes this song important is the fact that there is a "homoerotic potential" to its lyrics that makes it relatable (142). This "homoerotic potential" is revealed in the infatuation that the singer—who is female—has for Aliyah and her black eyes, and her emphasis on how enchanting and unforgettable those eyes are. This, ultimately, is what makes this song's lyrical story "potentially queer."

Similarly to "**Al Bostah,**" "**The Shalabiya Girl**" is also about a girl. Popularized in the 1950s by Fairuz, this old folksy song[32] of Levantine descent is sonically slower than "**Al Bostah**," with its theme more wistful. "**The Shalabiya Girl**" transports the listener to a field of grass with a pomegranate tree in the middle of it, and the wind softly blows while the airy vocals of Fairuz become all-encompassing. What sets this song apart from the previous one is its beginning, which puts emphasis on the love the singer has for this almond-eyed girl with refined beauty (or a *shalabiya* girl). This puts the song's "homoerotic potential" at the forefront of its theme by using more romantic words in the lyrics. What stands out the most is the first verse of the song, because it immediately describes the girl's features and how the singer feels about her. The lyrics are as follows:

"البنت الشلبية، عيونها لوزية

بحبِك من قلبي، يا قلبي

إنتي عينيا"[33]

[32] The origins of the song, and who it was written by and originally sung by, aren't known due to the age of the song; however, Fairuz's version is the most popular and widely known version sung in the MENA region.

[33] The *kasra* and the letter **ي** are used here to make the words feminine. First, in the second line, with the word "بحبِك," which is the feminine form of the phrase meaning "I love *you*"; second, in the third line, with the word "إنتي," which is the feminine form of the word *you*. Not only that, the direct use of the word "البنت," or *girl*, in the first line immediately sets the tone of the song, and reveals to the listener the gender of the singer's lover.

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"*The girl with refined beauty, her eyes are almond-shaped,*

I love you with all my heart, you are my heart,

***you are my eyes*"**

(*Genius Lyrics*)

This song has an even stronger "homoerotic potential," as it uses the word "love" directly in the second line when describing the singer's feelings for the girl. While this "love" isn't explicitly labeled as romantic, its romantic potential is there. The lyrics' description of the girl's beauty, their soft way of describing her almond-shaped eyes in the first line, and the heart-consuming love that they seem to have for her in the lines that follow can all be interpreted as romantic. This romance, then, can be seen as "queer"; when using the "queer lens," it becomes clearer that the love the singer has for the almond-eyed girl might be romantic.

Despite those two popular songs, Fairuz has not been perceived as "queer" by the region. Shomali touches on this point by saying that the reasoning for this is that the legendary Lebanese singer doesn't represent her gender in an "unconventional" way (Kaabour 143). Physically, she is the ideal "feminine" woman; delicate voice, soft makeup, and feminine clothing all accompany the legend, the persona, and the stage presence that is Fairuz. However, Shomali finds that this "bears no significance" to her; Fairuz's queerness isn't what she concerns herself with, but, rather, the emotions of the songs and the "potential" of their queerness is what she finds comfort in (143). More specifically, she sees the singer's "**Al Bostah**" as a point of representation for her own queerness. "My delight in Fairuz's obsession with 'aliyah' (in the song)," she states, "reflects the desire to see oneself represented in the culture: a feminine woman longing for another woman" (143). This delight is, ultimately, what matters most for many queer Arabs who

wish to feel connected to their culture in some way, shape, or form. The fluidity of the Arabic language reflects that; in its complexity, the gendered nature of the language allows for this "queer potentiality" in Arabic lyrics that queer Arabs can resonate with.

Similarly to Fairuz, Abd El Halim Hafez is also a legend in the Arab music world who rose to fame during the "Golden Age" era. Nicknamed "العندليب الأسمر" ("*the Dark-Skinned Nightingale*") for his tan skin and violet-toned voice that captured millions of hearts and "ملك الرومانسية" ("*the King of Romance*") for his romantic songs, Abd El Halim is considered one of "the 'Great Four of Arab Music'"[34] (Rafik 2022). His journey to fame was short-lived, as his health declined due to bilharzia[35] and he passed away at the age of forty-eight in 1977. However, his music transcends past his time, with even the *New York Times* calling him the "Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra of the Arab world" long after his passing (Rafik 2022). This makes his influence on Arab music and his songs extremely important, as he is quite influential and legendary in the region.

Two of his most popular songs—"**Ahwak** (اهواك)" and "**Ana Lak Ala Toul** (أنا ألك على طول)"—are just two of the many songs in his discography with lyrics that allude to a male romantic interest. Similarly to Fairuz, Abd El Halim wasn't perceived as anything other than "heterosexual" for singing those songs; however, due to the gendered nature of the Arabic language, the "homoerotic potential" of the song's lyrics serves as a driver for interpreting them as "queer." For example, "**Ahwak**"—released in 1960 and written by legendary Egyptian composer Mohammed Abdel Wahab—is a gentle love track sung in the Egyptian dialect and it is a masterclass in the dramatics of young love and yearning. Abd El Halim's velvety tone

[34] 'The Great Four of Arab Music,' as Rafik refers to them, are Abd El Halim Hafez, Umm Kulthum, Mohammed Abdel Wahab, and Farid al-Atrash. They are considered the pioneers of the "Golden Age" era of the Arab music world.
[35] A parasitic disease found in freshwater. It is said that Abd El Halim likely contracted it while swimming in the pond near his childhood home.

intensifies the longing the singer has for the lover, and the lyrics set the tone for a love story that is melancholy. The lyrics are as follows:

"أهواك وأتمنّى لو أنساك

وأنسى روحي ويّاك

وإن ضاعت يبقى فداك

لو تنساني

وأنساك وأتاريني بنسى جفاك

وأشتاق لعذابي معاك

وألقى دموعي فاكراك

أرجع تاني

في لقاك الدّنيا تجيني معاك

ورضاها يبقى رضاك

وساعتها يهون في هواك

في هواك طول حرماني"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"I love you, and I wish that if I forget you

I (also) forget my soul with you

And it it gets lost, it's acceptable

if you've forgotten me

So I forget you, and I forget all the pain you caused me,

and I start longing for it again

And I find my tears remember you,

so I return to you

At times, the whole world comes with you,

and its wish is your wish

And then, maybe you will stop

depriving my love of you"

(*Shira*)

Here, the lyrics being sung are using the masculine form of *you* in Arabic.[36] Lyrically, the singer is yearning for a lover that he is in conflict with, and whose love brings him back into his life every time. It is a sad song, with the typical longing and heartache that comes with young love. Also sung in the Egyptian dialect, Hafez's "**Ana Lak Ala Toul**"—released in 1976, shortly before his death, and written by well-known Egyptian poet and lyricist Mamoun AlShinnawi—follows the same theme of yearning and longing. However, it is less about heartbreak, and more about wanting to be loved by one's lover. Hafez's vocals tug at the heartstrings, raw and charged with emotion. Also, the prominent theatrical instrumentals contrasted by the piano solo at the beginning are striking, immediately setting the tone for the melancholy that the listener is about to experience throughout the entire song. The lyrics are as follows:

"انا لك على طول خليك ليا

خد عين منى وطل عليا

وخد التنين واسال فيا

من اول يوم راح منى النوم

[36] For example, in the first line, "أهواك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "*you* are the air I breathe," or "I love *you*." In the first and fifth lines, "أنساك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "to forget *you*." In the second line, "وباك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "with *you*." In the fifth line, "جفاك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "the pain *you* caused." In the sixth and ninth lines, "معاك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "with *you*." In the seventh line, "دموعي فاكراك" uses the masculine form for the phrase meaning "my tears remember *you*." In the ninth line, "لقاك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "(upon) seeing *you*." In the tenth line, "رضاك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "*your* satisfaction," or, in this case, it can also mean "*your* wish." Finally, in the eleventh and twelfth lines, "هواك" is the masculine form of the word meaning "*your* air," or, in the case of this song, it can also mean "*your* love." If a *kasra* or the letter ي is added at the end—like in Fairuz's songs—, then the *you* becomes feminine, and it indicates that the person that Hafez is singing to is a girl. However, the *you* remains in the masculine form throughout the entire song, indicating that the person being sung about is another man.

ابعتلى سلام قول اى كلام

من قلبك او من ورا قلبك

مش يبقى حرام اسهر وتنام

وتفوتني اقاسي نار حبك

النيل والليل والشوق والميل

بعتولى وجيت اسال عنك

اشتقت اليك وحشتنى عينيك

مش عارف اهرب فين منك"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"I am always yours, so be mine

Take one eye from me and look at me

and take them both to ask for me

From the first day, sleep has left me

Send me a greeting, tell me anything

(whether) from your heart or not from the heart

Isn't it a sin, to leave me sleepless while you sleep

and leave me tortured from the fires of your love?

The Nile and the night and the longing and the passion,

they sent for me, and I came to ask about you

I missed you and I missed your eyes,

and I don't know how to escape from you"

(*Lyrics Translate*)

Similarly to "**Ahwak**," this song uses the masculine forms of the words to describe—or speak to—the lover[37]. Overall, Hafez's music speaks to the tortured soul; in singing the song using the masculine forms of the words, this song opens up a door for a "potentially queer" romance story that speaks to queer Arabs who are similarly yearning for their lovers. This makes the song's "homoerotic potential" a source of comfort for them.

Both Fairuz and Abd El Halim are legends of their time, with their music influencing the next generations of Arab singers to come. The latter half of this section looks at singers in the region who are still active today, and examines the "homoerotic potential" of their songs' lyrics using the same lens—the "queer lens"—that was used for Fairuz's and Abd El Halim's songs.

Even as the years pass, the gendered *you* plays a powerful role in the lyrics of popular Arab music. Pivotal music from legendary artists still active today, like Ilham al-Madfai, Hussain Al-Jassmi, and Amr Diab, still use masculine forms of Arabic words in the lyrics. To reiterate: while it can be argued that this is the default form to use, and that these artists aren't perceived as "queer" in the region, this is of no matter; what's more important is looking at the "homoerotic potential" of these songs' lyrics, and to dive into how, when looking at them through a "queer lens," these songs can be interpreted as "queer."

"**Ma Li Shegel** (مالي شغل)" by Iraqi musician Ilham Al-Madfai is a perfect example of this. Al-Madfai, whose songs have greatly influenced the Iraqi music world, incorporates western style[38] into traditional Arabic sounds in his songs. "**Ma Li Shegel**," or "**I Have No**

[37] For example, in the first line, "لك" is the masculine form of the word "*yours*" and "خليك ليا" is the masculine form of the phrase meaning "(*you*) stay with me," or, in this case, "(*you*) be mine." The lack of *kasra* and ي at the end make them masculine. Also, in the second line, "طل" is the masculine form of the word "(*you*) look." In the second and third lines, "خذ" is the masculine form of the word "(*you*) take." Also in the third line, the masculine form of the word "(*you*) ask" is used ("اسأل"). In the fifth line, "ابعت" is the masculine form of the word "(*you*) send," with the "لي" added in the end to mean "to me." In the sixth line, "قلبك" is used twice, and it's the masculine form of the word "*your* heart." In the seventh line, "تنام" is the masculine form of the word "(*you*) sleep." In the eighth line, "حبك" is the masculine form of the word "*your* love." In the ninth line, "اشتقت إليك" uses the masculine form of the word "إليك" to mean "I miss *you*." In the same line, the masculine form of "عينيك" (*your* eyes) is used. Finally, the tenth line uses "منك," the masculine form of the word "from *you*." Each line is dedicated to using the masculine form, leaving no room for doubt to form in the ears of the listener that the object of the singer's desire and yearning is male.

[38] Here, I use "western style" as a descriptor for the style of music produced mainly by the European/North American region.

Business"—popularized by Al-Madfai in 1999—is an old, Iraqi folksy song that the singer adds his own creative spin on. Al-Madfai's version of the song is the perfect blend of Spanish guitar riffs mixed with Iraqi vocalization and lyricism. The lyrics are written in the first-person point-of-view, with the theme alluding to the singer as someone who decided to visit the market just to see his past lover whom he misses the most. The lyrics specifically say:

"مالي شغل بالسوق، مريت اشوفك

عطشان حفن سنين،

واروى على شوفك

اشلون انام الليل،

وانت على بالي؟

حتى السمچ بالماي، يبكي على حالي

حاير ودوّر عليك،

رحت وعفتني

شسويت انا واياك، يالماردتني؟

اريد اعبر الجسرين، كرخ ورصافه

واسأل عن المحبوب، منهو اللي شافه"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"I have no business in the market, I only passed by to see you

I have been thirsty for some water for years,

and my thirst is quenched upon seeing you

And how am I supposed to sleep the nights,

when you are on my mind?

Even the fish in the water, they cry for my circumstances

I wander while tormented and I look for you,

yet you left me

What have I done to you, o, you who desire me not?

I want to cross the two bridges, Karkh and Rasafa,

and ask about the beloved, and who has seen him"

(*Lyrics Translate*)

The song is written using the Iraqi dialect, and the lyrics repeatedly reinforce that the subject of the song—the lover—is male.[39] The lyrics' usage of the masculine form of words is consistent throughout the decades of music that Al-Madfai chooses to sing. He is another perfect example of how the singer's sexuality isn't what's important; rather, it is the "queer potential" of the song's romantic meaning when it is sung by a male singer. Al-Madfai's sexuality isn't challenged or questioned, and neither are any of the male artists who follow the same formula. "**Awal Jirani** (اول جيراني)," recently released in October of this year and written by Iraqi poet Hamid AlGharbawi, is a great example of this. It reveals that, even in this generation, a song such as this doesn't bring forth questions of the singer's sexuality.

[39] For example, in the first verse (which is also the chorus of the song), the words "أشوفك" (I see *you*) and "شوفك" (seeing *you*) both use the masculine form of *you*, as they both end with the letter ك and are not accompanied by a *kasra* or the letter ي. In the second verse, the listener is reminded again that the lover is male through "أنت," the masculine form of *you*. In the third verse, where the singer expresses that he is tormented and looking for his lover, the lover is identified as male through the masculine form of the words "عليك" (on/for *you*), "رحت" (*you* left), "عفتني" (*you* left me), "واياك" (with/to *you*), and "يالماردتني" (*you*, who didn't desire/want me). In the final verse, the word "المحبوب" (*the lover*) is in the masculine form, and "شافه" (who has seen *him*) directly uses the same form to reiterate that the subject is male.

“**Awal Jirani**”—“**My First Neighbor**”—is on a similar theme of yearning and longing for a lover who is in conflict with the singer:

"الله وصى بسابع جار

وأنت أول جيراني

يعني دار احنا بصف دار

لا ثالث ولا ثاني

قل لي وياك ايش سويت

سلم علي لو مريت

قلبي صاير مثل النار

كافي لا تبقى أناني

لا تلتفت لا تندار

والجار حقه على الجار

قابل بعيد أنا عليك

لو غيرت عنواني

حبيتك أنا من سنين

بيا أبد ما حسيت

قلبي من يشوفك يرتاح

كل ما رحت كل ما جيت

امنيتي أنا احكي وياك

وتسمعني وتحاكيني

تعرف اريدك واهواك

وش قد تحبك عيني

حن يا حلو يا مغرور

والدنيا يا جاري تدور

انتبه ليا ولا تخاف

والله احبك اني"

(Hassan)

"God recommended that we care for our seven neighbors,

and you are my first neighbor

Meaning our houses are neighboring one another side-by-side,

not as second or third

Tell me, what did I do to you?

Say hello to me if you pass by,

enough, don't remain cruel

You don't turn around and you don't look back,

as if there is no promise of treating thy neighbor with respect

As if I am far from you,

or changed my address

I have loved you for years,

and you never felt anything towards me

My heart finds peace when I see you,

every time you leave, every time you come back

My wish is to speak with you,

and you listen to me and talk to me

You know that I want you and I love you,

and how much my eyes love you

Be kind, o, one who is sweet and arrogant,

and the world, my dear neighbor, spins

Pay attention to me and do not be afraid,

I swear to God, I love you"[40]

The lyrics use a quote from Prophet Mohammed in the first line of the first verse to remind the singer's lover of his duty to not be cruel to him. It reiterates the word of God that was told by the Prophet, in which Muslims are asked to show respect as far as the seventh neighbor. This number is meant to be taken as a metaphor, rather than as an exact; the "seventh neighbor" could hypothetically be from a different country, or even continent. The overall idea of this quote is similar to the Christian saying "Love Thy Neighbor," and it is used in the metaphorical sense throughout the song. For example, when the second line—"you are my first neighbor"—is sung, it is meant less as "you are *literally* the neighbor to my right," and more as "we are *so* close to

[40] Due to its age, there are currently no English translations of the song. Therefore, for this thesis, it is translated by me, as I am a fluent Arabic speaker and am also Iraqi. My approach is to translate this song authentically and use my own knowledge of my native tongue to do this song's original lyrics justice.

one another." In the third and fourth lines, it doubles down on the metaphorical meaning with the literal meaning, using "side-by-side, not as second or third" to mean "of all people (neighbors) in the world, you come first." These notions are quite romantic; the lyrics emphasize the importance of the singer's lover, and how much his indifference and cruelty towards him hurts him. It equates it to that of betraying the word of God.

The use of the Islamic word of God continues in the second line of the third verse, where the lyrics reiterate that one must "respect thy neighbor," a saying that is, again, seen both in Islam and in Christianity. It reinforces that the singer's lover is betraying this notion by being distant towards him. This is shown through the lines "as if I am far from you, or changed my address." The theme of the lover being one's "eyes" is also seen in this song, similar to Fairuz's and Abd El Halim's songs[41]. The fourth line of the fifth verse has the line "and how much my eyes love you," emphasizing to the listener the singer's love towards his lover. These lines further iterate that the song is romantic.

The song also uses the masculine forms of *you* to indicate that the lover is male.[42] However, to reiterate: Al-Madfai's sexuality—like Fairuz's and Abd El Halim's—isn't questioned when singing these songs, as it is traditionally a common practice to use masculine forms of words in Arabic lyrics, poetry, or literature. This, inadvertently, creates a "potentially queer" reading of these lyrics that helps openly queer Arab artists to resonate with their songs, as

[41] This is inspired by classical themes of love and romance in Arabic poetry, where one's love for one person is amplified when they are equated with one's eyes.

[42] In the first verse—which is also the chorus of the song—, the masculine form of the word itself is used ("أنت"). In the second verse, the words "قل" (*you* tell), "وياك" (with/to *you*), "سلم" (*you* greet), "مريت" (*you* pass by), and "تبقى اناني" (*you* remain cruel) are all masculine. Similarly, in the third verse, "تلتفت" (*you* turn around), "تتدار" (*you* look back), and "عليك" (on/from *you*) are also all masculine. The fourth verse also has the masculine form of the phrases "I love *you*" ("حبيتك"), "*you* never felt" ("ما حسيت") and "when my heart sees *you*" ("قلبي من يشوفك"). The fifth verse continues with more masculine forms of phrases, such as "*you* listen to me and talk to me" ("تسمعني وتحاكيني"), "*you* know that I want *you* and I love *you*" ("تعرف أريدك واهواك"), and "and how much my eyes love *you*" ("وش قد تحبك عيني"). In the final verse, the phrase "be kind, o, one who is sweet and arrogant" ("حن يا حلو يا مغرور") uses the masculine forms of "be kind" ("حن") and "sweet and arrogant" ("يا حلو يا مغرور").

well as write their own songs using the fluidity of the Arabic language, and its gendered nature, as a source for queer Arab expression.[43] Hussain Al-Jassmi's music is another example of this.

Hussain Al-Jassmi is an Emirati singer who possesses one of the most powerful voices in the current Arab music scene. His vocal range is versatile, making him stand out amongst the rest of the male singers in this genre, and he perfectly switches from lower registers for some songs and hits the highest of notes in others. His song "**Habibi Barceloni** (حبيبي برشلوني)"—released in 2012 and written by Emirati poet and lyricist Turkey Alshareef—is an upbeat, comedic song that brings in cultural references to soccer and adds an air of fun to the romantic tone of the lyrics. Translated into English as "**My Lover is a Barcelona Fan**," this song is sung in a flirtatious way and is reminiscent of young love, a theme that is consistent with popular love songs from the region. In it, the lyrics state that the singer is a Madrid fan, a popular soccer team that is often culturally pitted against Barcelona, his lover's favorite team. This brings in the topic of soccer, and its importance in the region.

Soccer has an enormous cultural and economic impact in the MENA region. After all, it is a global sport that is highly monetized. The World Cup alone boosts its host country's GDP and tourist attraction rates; it is also used as a way to garner financial and commercial attention to the area (Aragao). In the MENA region, it also plays a huge part of social life between Arabs; it is the most popular sport, and, when the World Cup is in season, the topic of conversation, cafe adventures, and nightlife all revolve around it (Chani). "**Habibi Barceloni**" is the perfect example of how much impact on the culture soccer has, as it uses the two most popular and pitted-against teams in the region to create a comedic, *Romeo-and-Juliet*-esque love song. It also uses masculine forms of words when talking about the lover; this, in turn, creates a narrative where the singer is singing for a male lover.

[43] This will be further discussed in the latter section of the analysis when I dive deeper into openly queer Arab artists and their work.

"حبيبي برشلوني، يموت ببرشلونة" (*Anghami*)

"My lover is Barceloni," the first line of the chorus reads, "and *he* dies for Barcelona."[44] Then, on the second line, the lyrics double down on the singer's loyalty to Madrid, before concluding that, regardless of this loyalty, he would change teams just for the sake of appeasing his lover.

"وأنا مدريدي، لكن بغير لعيونه" (*Anghami*)

"And I am *Madridi* (a Madrid fan)," the singer flirtatiously continues, "but I will convert for the sake of *his* eyes."[45] The importance of eyes is, once again, a continuous theme that makes an appearance in this song, as well. It solidifies the singer's commitment to appeasing the eyes of his lover by converting to become a Barcelona fan for him.

What is interesting about the online translation of this song is it switches the masculine forms to feminine ones in English. For example, *Lyrics Translate*, a website that I use throughout this analysis to help me with the translations, remains authentic when converting gendered Arabic words to non-gendered English ones, such as *you*, *your*, *yours*. However, for this song, it switches the masculine forms of words that are gendered to the feminine form, or sometimes it avoids using it altogether. For example, for the line "and *he* dies for Barcelona," the website translates it to "dies for Barcelona," completely foregoing using any form (*Lyrics Translate*). Then, for the line "but I will convert for the sake of *his* eyes," the website translates it to "but I will convert for the sake of *her* eyes" (*Lyrics Translate*). For the remainder of the song, this is a constant reoccurrence. Every Arabic *he, him, his* is changed to an English *she, her, hers,* while the second-person pronouns are translated into non-gendered *you, your, yours*. This could be due to the already-established knowledge that it is a common practice to use masculine forms in song

[44] The first word "حبيبي" (*my love*) is written in the masculine form, indicating that the lover is male. Similarly, the phrase "يموت ببرشلونة" is also in the masculine form.
[45] The word "لعيونه" (for *his* eyes) is written in the masculine form, which solidifies that the lyrics are about a male lover.

lyrics in the MENA region, as discussed above. Thus, the assumption is that, since they are sung by a male singer, then the lyrics are culturally perceived to be for a female lover, rather than male. However, this is a heteronormative assumption that dismisses the complexity of the Arabic language and the fluidity of meaning that it creates. It also paints the region as inherently "heterosexual," which is dismissive of the queer Arab experience and how they might perceive these songs. As seen with this song, and the next song by Amr Diab, this analysis works against this by bringing forth this problem, while also calling it out in favor of seeking authenticity for the translation of these songs' lyrics.

Amr Diab, an Egyptian pop singer, plays a pivotal role in revolutionizing the Arab music scene. For one, he is the first Arab singer with a *Guinness World Record* of winning the most music awards worldwide, and continues to climb up the charts today with his timeless songs (Guinness World Records 2016). His song "**Wala Ala Balo** (ولا على باله)", or ("**Not on *His* Mind**"),—released in 1998 and written by Egyptian lyricist Mohamed Refai—mixes western techno, hiphop, and Egyptian rhythm to create a masterpiece that is easy to dance to. The lyrics are romantic, sung in the Egyptian dialect and accompanied by Diab's powerful voice. The main theme of the song is the singer's lover not having a clue about his love for him. He occupies his mind, makes him sleepless at night, and is the reason for his inner turmoil. Despite its lyrical theme, the song accompanies a rap in English that urges the listener to dance to the beat and to appreciate the rhythm of Egyptian music, a contrast that adds to the club-music vibe that the song is trying to convey.

This song's online translation runs into a similar problem as Al-Jassmi's. *Genius Lyrics* is another extremely popular platform for music lyrics, containing translations of songs written in different languages. Its English translation of this song also uses the feminine, instead of

masculine, forms of the lyrics. Here is *Genius Lyrics*'s Arabic lyrics and the English translation of "**Wala Ala Balo**":

"حبيبي ولا على باله شوقي إليه

وأنا شاغل بالي أنادي عليه

وليالي كتير أفكر فيه وأحن إليه

ولا داري

كفاية إنه بقاله ليلة ويوم

على طول في خيالي ومفيش نوم

وليالي كتير أفكر فيه وأحن إليه

ولا داري

عيونه فيها كلام في ليل خلاب

ملا قلبي غرام في أحلى عذاب

وليالي كتير أفكر فيه وأحن إليه

ولا داري"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"My darling has no clue about my love for her

She's on my mind and so I call for her

And many nights I think of her, and long for her,

but she has no clue

It's enough that it's been a day and a night

That she has been on my mind, and I can't sleep at night

And many nights I think of her, and long for her,

but she has no clue

Her eyes tell me words that I can't resist

They filled my heart with love and the sweetest of tortures

And many nights I think of her, and long for her,

but she has no clue"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

The Arabic lyrics are accurate to the source material; they follow the exact lyrics that are sung by Diab in the song, and include the masculine forms of each word.[46] However, the English lyrics diverge from the original material. As seen above, *Genius Lyrics* uses feminine pronouns to translate the lyrics. For example, the chorus's lines use "for *her*" and "*she*," despite the masculine form being used in Arabic. This continues on in the verses, with the repetitive use of *she* and *her* as the translation to the masculine forms of the Arabic words. This is an incorrect translation because it fails to take into account what I have consistently mentioned throughout this analysis: the Arabic language is gendered, and, because of it, even non-gendered English words such as *you*, *your*, and *yours* can indicate whether or not the person is male or female when written in Arabic. Therefore, it is essential that the words are translated in the correct format that they are written as. To divert from using the masculine forms of the song's lyrics is to divert from authenticity. While lyrics of these songs can be interpreted differently, the

[46] For example, in the chorus, the first line, "حبيبي ولا على باله شوقي اليه" translates to "*my love* has no clue in *his* mind about my love for *him*." What makes it *him*, instead of *her*, is the masculine forms of the words "حبيبي" (*my love*), "باله" (*his* mind), and "اليه" (for *him*). Similarly, what makes the subject of the first verse male, and not female, is the consistent usage of masculine forms of phrases, such as: "انه بقاله" (*he* stays/remains) and "أفكر فيه واحنّ اليه" (I think about *him* and I long for *him*). In the final verse, it is solidified that the one being sung about is male because of the masculine form of "عيونه" (*his* eyes), as well as the repeated phrase in the lyrics from the first verse. These are all indicators of the lover being male, and they are authentically shown through the Arabic lyrics on the website.

translations of them should be exact to remain authentic. Not doing so further indicates that there is an assumption for an inherently "heterosexual" interpretation of these songs, which further dismisses the queer Arab experience.

The latter section of this analysis looks at two openly queer Arab artists and how they are inspired by the fluidity of the Arabic language, and its gendered nature, when creating their own songs. It also looks at how this inspiration is used as a form of queer Arab expression through the Arabic lyrics they produce. This section builds off of the literature review's emphasis on the importance of language, and how creating art using one's own language enhances their form of self-expression. It uses songs written by *Mashrou Leila*'s Hamed Sinno and singer-songwriter Bashar Murad to make these points.

Second: an analysis of songs written by openly queer Arabs

Openly queer Arab artists grew up not only listening to the artists from the former analysis section, but have also used their songs as inspiration for their own music.[47] The latter half of this analysis looks at how, through using the fluidity of the Arabic language and its gendered nature, openly queer Arab singers have found a linguistic outlet for self-expression through using lyrics written in their native language. In this way, queer Arab artists are working with the already-established lyrical styles in the region, while also using their own queer experiences to expand the music scene and express themselves.

When I began my journey of researching openly queer Arab singers in the industry, the first artist that came up was Hamed Sinno, the lead singer of *Mashrou Leila*. *Mashrou Leila*, known for incorporating different styles and genres with classic Arabic poetry and lyrics, was a

[47] The band *Mashrou Leila* cites Fairuz and "traditional Middle Eastern music" as their inspirations (*Fair Observer*; *Afropop Worldwide*); Similarly, Bashar Murad is cited as someone who blends "traditional Palestinian sounds with modern pop influences" from the MENA region (Abdel-Hadi).

band that consistently advocated for queer Arabs' rights in their music.[48] Hamed Sinno, who's openly queer and refers to themself as a non-binary "writer, musician, and social justice snowflake born and raised in Beirut," incorporated the poetic nature of Arabic lyrics in their songs to express their identity, while also using their platform and fame to illuminate the many problems that the MENA region's queer people face ("Hamed Sinno"). "**Ala Babu** – على بابه" ("**At His Door**") is one of the many songs where Sinno purposefully uses the masculine nature of the Arabic language to speak on their romantic experiences with other men.[49] "**Ala Babu**," released in 2013 and written by Sinno, is an indie-rock ballad with jazzy undertones that, similar to Abd El Halim's music, is all about romantic yearning. Sinno uses the Levantine dialect when writing the lyrics and singing the song. The lyrics are as follows:

بنام وبستدعيك بأحلامي

بتخيل ايديك محل ايدي

ليش بركعلك ليش برجعلك بس تخنقني

ليش بشفعلك ليش بخضعلك بس تحرقني

قول إنو برضيك كيف ما بيرضيك

وبس يبوسك وين ببوسك بعدك بتتخيلني

قلبي بيدق على بابك وبتشنقني بالوتين

قلبي بيرميني أمام رجليك

[48] Hamed Sinno is cited by *The Gazelle* as unafraid of "expressing (their) support for queer rights," with both "(their) performances and lyrics" including topics related to "queer culture" and queer Arabs' rights (Al Neaimi).

[49] In a *The Guardian* documentary on the queer revolution in the Middle East, Hamed Sinno is recorded speaking to the audience before *Mashrou Leila's* performance of "**Kalaam**" saying that there is "this thing in the Arabic language where everything in Arabic is necessarily gendered as either feminine or masculine" and that Sinno's intention with this song is to "exist outside of that binary" (Collins).

كان نفسي احميك وتؤذيني

كان نفسي أؤذيك و تحميني

من عيوبي و ذنوبي و ندوبي

بعيوبي وذنوبي وندوبي

قلبي بيدق على بابك وبتشنقني بالوتين

قلبي بيرميني أمام رجليك

دوب الليل بكأسي عشان أنام

الصحو بلاك ما فيه سلام

قلبي بيدق على بابه

وبيشتهي غيابه

قلبي بيدق على بابه

وبيلتهف عذابه

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"I'm sleeping and recall you in my dreams

I phantasize that your hand is the place of my hand

Why do I kneel down in front of you,

why do I come back to you just that you strangle me

Why do I plead for you, why do I obey you just that you burn me

Tell me that I satisfy you like he satisfies you

And just kisses you where I kiss you and then you phantasize about me

My heart knocks on your door and you strangle me on my aorta

My heart throws me before your feet

It was me who protected you and you hurt me

It was me who hurt you and you protected me

Out of my flaws, my sins, my scars

In my flaws, my sins, my scars

My heart knocks on your door and you strangle me on my aorta

My heart throws me before your feet

The night goes on in my glass without me sleeping

It's truth is it doesn't have peace without you

My heart knocks on his door and desires his absence

My heart knocks on his door and longs for his torture"[50]

(Lyrics Translate)

In this song, the singer is clearly yearning for a lover who is not theirs (and may be taken by someone else completely). This lover is also clearly male.[51] However, to be clear: if Sinno weren't openly queer, or if this song was sung by someone who identified as openly

[50] One thing to point out here is *Lyrics Translate* includes the accurate translations of both the masculine and feminine forms of the words for *Mashrou Leila's* song, while it foregoes doing so for Amr Diab's "**Habibi Wala Ala Balo**" (as shown in the former section of this analysis). This brings back the question of authenticity for translating Arabic lyrics on such websites.

[51] When looking at the first verse of the song, all the forms of the Arabic *you* are in the masculine form. For example, in the first line, it says "بنام وبستدعيك باحلامي" (I'm sleeping and recall *you* in my dreams). Here, the word "بستدعيك" (recall *you*) is in the masculine form (*bes-tad-eek*). If it were feminine, it would be "بستدعيكي" (*bes-ted-eek-ee*). The added *ee* in the end makes it feminine. This same pattern is seen throughout the rest of the verse: "ايديك" (*your* hand) is masculine (ee-deik) because the *ee* sound at the end isn't added using the letter "ي." Similarly, "بركعلك" (I kneel for *you*) and "برجعلك" (I come back to *you*) also lack the added *ee* (or "ي") at the end, rendering them masculine in nature. In the final line of the first verse, the *ee* is also absent from "بشفعلك" (plead for *you*) and "بخضعلك" (obey *you*), making them masculine. Throughout the rest of the song, this pattern of choosing the masculine forms to describe the singer's lover is consistent, making it clear that it is about another man.

"heterosexual," the song would still have the same meaning because of the way the lyrics are written.[52] However, what sets this song apart from the songs discussed in the former section is this: while the songs written for Fairuz, Abd El Halim, Al-Madfai, Al-Jassmi, and Diab are dissected for their "queer potential," Sinno's lyrics are looked at as a form of queer expression by a queer Arab artist. Sinno's open representation of their identity and sexuality are what make their songs stand out; also, they are seen by many queer Arab listeners as a doorway to openly identifying with and expressing their sexuality through the music they listen to.[53] Similarly to the fluidity of the Arabic language and its gendered nature, Sinno's fluid gender identity also allows for queer Arabs who identify with this same fluidity to also be represented by the band's lyrics; "**Kalaam** – كلام" is a perfect example of this.

"**Kalaam**" ("**Words**"), released in 2015 and also written by Sinno, begins with a hauntingly beautiful violin solo and a choir, before Sinno's distinct, smoky vocals take over the song. The song's lyrics speak of two lovers whose love is seen as striking and controversial by society, and Sinno's beautiful lyricism highlights how both lovers stand above the controversy and focus on what's most important: their love for one another. What makes this song especially unique is Sinno's take on the lover they're singing for in the song; more specifically, they alternate between using the masculine and feminine forms of the Arabic language to address their lover. Sinno's lover then becomes both masculine and feminine—both male and female—which can be interpreted as a non-binary lover. The lyrics are as follows:

إذا لمستِك بحلاوة رقصِك قربي عليّ شوي

في جحيم تحت جلدي وانت إيديك باردين

[52] In other words, the song would still be about yearning for another man, even if sung by another singer.
[53] In the same *The Guardian* documentary on Youtube, it is cited that *Mashrou Leila's* performances in the MENA region were significant for their queer fans, and the queer Arab community, because it was "a big deal…that someone who was visibly queer was also being given a platform"; in the same video, fans are showcased openly talking about their love for the band and the powerful messages behind the band's song lyrics, with one of them saying that *Mashrou Leila's* music made it possible for "queer Arab representation" to occur in the MENA region (Collins).

والجهلانين ملتحين بأوراق التّين

ومُقْمَحين وحواجبهم مَرفوعين

كتبوا حدود البلد عجسدي وجسدَك

والجلد بيكشّد الكلام

كلمتي عكلمتِك كجسدي عجسدَك

والجلد بيحرِّك الكلام

حاسسني حاسّة اللي إنت حاسس فيه

وين العيب حسّي اللي إنتِ حاسّة فيه

وبذُوق الوِسكي والأغلاط عشفافِك

ما بتتعطّل لغة الكلام

الحروف بتلفّنا لمّا وشوِش كل أسراري بتِمْنا

وإنتَ بترجع لأيقوناتَك، وأنا للفراغ

كتبوا حدود البلد عجسدي وجسدَك

والجلد بيكشّد الكلام

كلمتي عكلمتِك كجسدي عجسدَك

والجلد بيحرِّك الكلام

حاسسني حاسّة اللي إنت حاسس فيه

وين العيب حسّي اللي إنتِ حاسّة فيه

جسدَك/دِك

عم بيحرِّك

لغتَك/تِك

عم بتفرِّق

جسدَك/دِك

عم بيفرِّق

لغتَك/تِك

عم بتحرِّك

(*Genius Lyrics*)

"If you touch the way you dance, come dance a little closer

A hell burns beneath my skin, and your hands feel cold

The ignorant weave fig leaves into their beards

With eyes shut though open, and eyebrows raised

They wrote the country's borders (upon my body ; upon your body)

In flesh-ligatured- words

My word upon your word (as my body upon your body)

Flesh-conjugated-words

You feel me feeling what you feel

So why all the shame? just feel what you feel

I taste mistakes and whiskey on your lips

And yet the language of words persists

Its letters cloak us as i whisper all my secrets into our mouth

Then you return to your idols, and i return to the void

They wrote the country's borders (upon my body ; upon your body)

In flesh-ligatured- words

My word upon your word (as my body upon your body)

Flesh-conjugated-words

You feel me feeling what you feel

So why all the shame? just feel what you feel

Your body conjugates

Your language separates

Your body separates

Your language conjugates"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

As seen in the above lyrics, the song is sultry and romantic, and it defies binary gender forms by the way Sinno's lyrics alternate between addressing the lover as both male and female.[54] This choice is intentional by Sinno. In 2022, *The Guardian* released a YouTube

[54] For example, in the first section, the first two lines are directly addressing the lover; however, while the first line addresses a female lover, the second line addresses a male one. Specifically, in the first line, the words "لمستِك" (*your* touch) and "رقصِك" (*you* dance) both have the accent marks underneath the letters ت and ص, which produce that *ee* sound that indicates that the *you* form is feminine. However, in the second line, the words "أنت ايديك" (*your* hands) both don't have neither an accent mark nor the letter ي after them (which, as stated before, both produce the *ee* sound), indicating that the both words are in the masculine form. The same thing follows in the second section; when addressing the lover, the first and third lines alternate between the masculine and feminine forms of the words "جسدَك" (*your* body) and "عكلمتِك" (upon *your* word). Specifically, for the word "جسدَك," the accent mark on top of the letter د is called a *fat-ha*, which produces an *eh* sound that makes the word masculine; alternatively, the *kasra* underneath the letter ت in the word "عكلمتِك" produces the *ee* sound that makes it feminine. In this way, the lyrics are addressing the lover with both pronouns in each section, making the lover defy the binary gender.

mini-documentary on *Mashrou Leila* and their achievements in the Middle East as a revolutionary, feminist band with an openly-queer front-man. In it, their biggest concert in Egypt is recorded, and Sinno explains to the audience that they wrote "**Kalaam**" with the alternating gender forms of each word shown above to both highlight "the Arabic language, where everything in Arabic is necessarily gendered as either feminine or masculine" and as an attempt to "exist outside of that gender binary" that the Arabic language lives inside of (Collins). Sinno's lyricism in "**Kalaam**" is the very argument of the latter half of this analysis: as an openly queer Arab artist, Sinno uses the Arabic language's already-established gendered nature to create lyrics that defy the binary. In this way, Sinno is using their native tongue to express themselves fully as queer, as Arab, and as non-binary. This reestablishes both the importance of language in expressing one's identity, while also allowing for doors to be opened with using one's native language to express identities that are beyond the language's gendered nature. In other words: while the former section of this analysis explores the "queer potential" of the gendered lyricism in Arabic songs, this section looks at how the language, itself, is used by queer Arabs themselves as a form of queer expression.

While *Mashrou Leila* faced backlash in the region because of Sinno being openly and unapologetically queer (which, ultimately, led to their unfortunate disbandment in the fall of 2022),[55] their work still opened doors for many queer Arabs who were able to better understand themselves—their identities, their queerness, their sexuality—because of *Mashrou Leila*'s work. Their work does not go in vain; the band's songs reached—in Sinno's own words—"many strangers around the world" who expressed gratitude for Sinno and the band's relatable lyrics. "Thirty-five thousand voices singing our song **Kalaam** in unison," Sinno marvels, "this is pride.

[55] Specifically, *The Gazelle* cites "false accusations," "heated debates" around the band's discography, and performance bans from several countries in the MENA region, as well as ongoing threats to the band members themselves being a large part of what made the band ultimately disband (Al Naeimi).

A home of 35,000 bodies, voices, souls; our collective refusal to be shamed and silenced" (Collins). This is what music written in the Arabic language does for queer Arabs; queer Arabs feel more connected to their identity when they sing about it in their native tongue.[56] Sinno, and *Mashrou Leila*, helped in achieving this, and for that, their legacy cannot be understated. Similarly, queer Palestinian artist Bashar Murad's lyrics emphasize the importance of the Arabic language for queer Arab expression, while also going beyond discussions of romance when directly expressing the artist's queer identity through his native tongue.

Bashar Murad, who's both a singer and songwriter, expresses complicated themes of queer identity and the struggles of being queer in the MENA region through Arabic lyrics. In this way, Murad is reestablishing the importance of exploring one's queer identity through their native tongue, while also going beyond just romance and love when documenting the queer Arab experience. "**ما بتغيرني**" ("**You Can't Change Me**"), released in 2018, is a reflection of those themes. In this pop-protest themed song, Murad's baritone vocals provide a melancholy twist to the otherwise upbeat instrumentals in the background that emphasize the importance of the lyrics of the song:

كنت دايمًا خايف من حالي

خايف من كلّ اختلفاتي

بنادي وبنادي ما وصلت الرسالة

لحالي بحكي مع خيالي

حبي غير قانوني

حبي غير قانوني

[56] Specifically, Mashrou Leila's choice to produce music in Arabic allows for "different aspects of society that are normally unaddressed in traditional Arabic songs such as lost love, war, politics, materialism, and immigration" to finally be addressed head-on using the region's primary language (*Khallina*).

حبي جابلي جنوني

بتقدر تاخد كل أوعيّ

هددني ربّط إيديّ

إحرمني من اسمي وحقي

أُرفضني ما بتغيّرني

كنت دايمًا تشوّشلي أفكاري

صوتك عاش في راسي

اليوم أنا ماشي

إذا بتنساني إنساني

صوتي بعيش بالأغاني

قصّولي جناحي وما زبط

إنّي أطلع من القفص

أنا عصفور انحبس

بتقدر تاخد كل أغراضي

حاول إمحيني عالفاضي

إتركني بحالي أنا راضي

ما بتغيرني

غيّرت بحالي وما زبط

إنّي أضل جوا القفص

أنا عصفور ما بينحبس

(Lyrics Translate)

"I was always scared of myself,

Scared of all my differences,

I called and called but you never got the message.

I'm alone, talking to my imagination

My love is illegal

My love is illegal

My love drove me insane

You can take away all my stuff

Threaten me, tie my hands up,

Take away my name and deprive me of my rights,

Scorn me…still, you can't change me

You've always messed around with my thoughts,

Your voice took home in my head,

Today I'm leaving.

If you forget me that's fine,

My voice will live on in the songs

They cut my wings off and I couldn't,

I couldn't leave the cage

I'm a bird that got locked up

You can take away all my stuff,

Try to erase me,

Leave me alone, I'm fine with that,

You can't change me

I tried changing myself but I couldn't,

I couldn't stay inside the cage,

I'm a bird you can't lock up"

(*Genius Lyrics*)

In this song, the lyrics reflect Murad's own experience as a queer Arab and how society views him. Using the Arabic language, Murad's lyricism is filled with symbolism and metaphors that reflect the already-established lyrical patterns that are often used in the MENA region.[57] Its

[57] As seen with music from the "Golden Era," as well as the current songs, metaphors and symbolism are a continuous theme that is used throughout Arabic songs. For example, Murad's usage of birds and cages as a metaphor for his own internal prison is thematically in tune with common metaphors used in Arabic poetry. Fairuz's and Abd El Halim's song lyrics equating one's lover with being one's own eyes (analyzed in the first section of the analysis) is another example of this.

theme is clear: the song speaks of someone who tried to conceal themselves for the sake of appeasing society, only to realize that—no matter what they try to do, or what pressures and metaphorical cages society locks them up in—they can't be changed. For example, in the first two sections, Murad expresses that he's always been terrified of how different he is, and how his love is illegal ("حبي غير قانوني"). In the third and fourth section, Murad expresses that "refusal to be shamed and silenced" that Sinno talks about; specifically, he states that—no matter what happens, no matter how society fights against his identity—he will not, and cannot be changed ("***you can take away all my stuff; threaten me, tie my hands up; take away my name and deprive me of my rights; scorn me…still, you can't change me***"). Therefore, he will solidify his identity through the songs that he puts out into the world ("***my voice will live on in the songs***"). He also uses birds and cages as a metaphor for society's prison on his identity; he expresses that he is a bird that "***couldn't stay inside the cage***" and that he is "***a bird you can't lock up***." The overall theme of the song is that the singer cannot be changed because he was born this way; this is something that is born out of Murad's frustration towards the world's reaction to his openly queer Palestinian identity.[58]

Murad's message of embracing one's identity in "**You Can't Change Me**" is a common theme explored in the English language[59]; however, Murad's usage of the Arabic language is what makes this song stand out. Through the implementation of Arabic lyrics, Murad centers the Arab experience surrounding such topics. Also, Murad's lyricism creates the same sense of "togetherness" that Sinno talks about. In other words, by using the Arabic language, Murad's message is better conveyed to many queer Arabs who feel the same way he does, making

[58] Specifically, in an interview with *NPR*, Murad describes his song lyrics as directly tackling frustrating occurrences of traditional toxicity in the MENA region and how it is "continually recycling the same toxic ideas," such as toxic masculinity and homophobia, and "passing them on to the next generations" of Arabs today (Estrin). In another article, Murad's music is cited as "a bold act of resistance in itself" because of his openness to being "unapologetically queer, defiantly Arab, and creatively untouchable" in the face of "a world where Palestinian identity is constantly politicized" (Randy M.).

[59] Lady Gaga's "**Born This Way**," Chappell Roan's "**Pink Pony Club**," and Janelle Monaé's "**Make Me Feel**" are examples of this.

them—as Sinno describes it—united through their "collective refusal to be shamed and silenced." This better connects him to queer Arab audiences, while also allowing them to resonate with the themes explored in his music. In this way, both Sinno and Murad open the door for a stronger queer Arab expression through using Arabic lyrics.

5. Conclusion

As seen with the previous sections, Eurocentric ideas surrounding the MENA region and sexuality are inherently harmful to queer Arabs. They perpetuate negative ideas that paint the MENA region as inherently "heterosexual" and unable to hold space for queerness, while also limiting the queer Arab experience. This, in turn, harms queer Arab artists and their experiences surrounding self-expression. Therefore, it is important to highlight the significance of the Arabic language, and the nuances behind it, when exploring how it is used to help illuminate the queer Arab experience. This is done through focusing on Arab music, and Arabic lyrics, by looking at famous Arab songs through a "queer lens" to explore their lyrics' "queer potentiality." It is also done through examining the Arabic lyrics written by queer Arabs themselves, and how those lyrics aid in highlighting queer Arab expression. This, in turn, allows for the centering of the queer Arab experience, and pushes back against Eurocentric ideas surrounding it.

Though this thesis highlights the queer Arab experience, as a whole, and puts emphasis on the Arabic language, certain limitations arise when exploring it academically. For example, working on a region whose primary language is Arabic and explaining it through the English language (whether through the use of English sources or translating Arabic works to make them more accessible) is a limitation in and of itself. Specifically, having to work in English when researching Arabic music, and flagging translation errors for Arabic lyrics, is one of those limitations. Another limitation is the nuances of the queer Arab experience, and how writing Arabic lyrics about one's complex identity is both a unique circumstance and one that is rooted in experiences that fit outside of the English language and its definitions of queer experiences. This isn't to say that queer people in Europe/North America and queer Arabs' experiences don't overlap; rather, I am emphasizing that the queer Arab experience is ultimately limited when

explored only in the English language. This is why this thesis argues for, and focuses on, Arabic language and lyrics specifically as a way of diverting from the dominant language that is often used when exploring queer self expression.

In extension, finding queer Arab artists who use the Arabic language itself, rather than English, to write their songs was also another challenge. Often, I found artists who identify with their culture, and are proud of it, but are not as fluent in Arabic or choose to forgo the language altogether when expressing themselves musically. This could be, in part, due to the dominance of the English language in the music industry as a whole.[60] It could also be due to the industry's pressures for the production of cultural works in English, rather than Arabic, because of the language's influence on music popularity.

Another limitation is the lack of access to efficient fieldwork surrounding queer Arab artists. Due to external factors, I was unable to visit countries in the MENA region in which the queer Arab scene, and local queer Arab artists, flourish. Therefore, finding openly queer Arab artists who are writing Arabic lyrics became even more difficult. However, this doesn't undermine the latter half of the analysis, as it is a crucial part to understanding the argument of the thesis. Therefore, I am extremely grateful to people like *Mashrou Leila* and Bashar Murad who, in spite of the backlash they received, are unapologetically queer and Arab in all the projects they produce.

In doing this thesis, I hope to highlight the beauty of enhancing queer Arab expression through working with the Arabic language; in other words, I hope that the future of this work sees an expansion of queer Arab artists who use Arabic lyrics as a form of self-expression. Arabic is a language that is complex and poetic, and I argue that its complexity opens doors to a

[60] This is seen outside of just Arab musicians. For example, South Korean global pop band BTS faced this in their most recent album comeback. In their Netflix documentary, they are seen conversing with heads of the company about the inclusion of more Korean lyrics in their new songs. In turn, the company pushed for more English lyrics, sounds, and influences in their songs, despite the album's name being "Arirang" (an homage to a traditional Korean folksong), as a way to appease global audiences and the English-lyric-dominated global music industry (*BTS: The Return*).

larger variety of expressing one's identity and queerness. To birth songs about queer love in the Arabic language is to birth a version of Fairuz's "**Bint El Shalabiya**," Abd El Halim's "**Ahwak**," or Amr Diab's "**Wala Ala Balo**" without having to read into their "queer potential." It gives space for young Arabs who might be grappling with the nuances behind their sexuality to directly look at songs as something to resonate with, rather than to be isolated from. It also illuminates how music is a space of beauty and life for queer Arabs.

The overall aim of this research is to push back against the currently expanding erasure of queer voices, Arab voices, and harmful perceptions of the MENA community. Through the work done in this thesis, my goal is to place a positive spotlight on the beauty of the Arabic language, Arab music, and the queer Arab community.

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