

Call Me Habibi:

Performing Partial Identity in Queer Lebanese Immigrants in Canada

by

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Abstract: Call Me Habibi: Performing Partial Identity in Queer Lebanese Immigrants in Canada

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The split of self that arises from existing as both a queer person in the Middle East and an immigrant in the West culminates in a constant partial identity performance. No spectator can ever fully witness or understand the complete identity of the performer; assimilation becomes a permanently imperative severing of identity. Drawing upon Alameddine's *Koolaid's*, a 1998 semi- autoethnographic novel which speaks of growing up queer during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war and the immigration to the United States during the AIDS crisis, and engaging with my own life experiences of growing up queer in Lebanon during the Israeli- Hezbollah conflicts and civil unrest of the 1990s and 2000s before immigrating to Canada post- 9/11, this hybrid thesis examines the inner workings of performing cleaved identity and the effects it has on the performer.

To my father,

May he know I am starting to pay attention to myself

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## I can't touch home

– Rabih Alameddine

In Rabih Alameddine's first novel, *Kooloids*, he writes: "In America, I fit, but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit" (40), a statement that perfectly articulates the constant incessant conflict of finding home for queer Lebanese immigrants in North America. Alameddine's book, first published in 1998, is a collection of seemingly fragmented narratives, anecdotes, and arcs, mostly centered around stories of Lebanese gay men during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, their immigration to the United States, and both American and Lebanese queer culture during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. As it is for most queer Lebanese people, "for Alameddine, sexuality and Arab ethnicity are the two defining identities" (Donica 434), and both guide and dictate how most LGBTQI+ Middle Eastern Arabs move through the world, questioning and negotiating their connections and relationships as well as the performance of these two portions of their identity.

In defining identity affiliations, Malin Åkerström and Veronika Burcar explain that "identity is not considered as something you 'have' but as something you do; it is created, put on stage" (105), indicating that in any social situation, connection, or relationship, portions of one's identity, whether consciously or unconsciously, are constantly being performed. One can always choose to bring certain discernable elements of their identity to the forefront, while electing to push others to the back, and while all elements remain intrinsically a part of that person's makeup, identity in its iterations and subsets is performed, continuously and intentionally. Identity performance is then, for the purposes of this paper, defined as the conscious social,

artistic, and interpersonal action, forefronting, and putting on stage of certain portions of one's identity at the expense of others at any given time. As Radia Chraibi et al. note, "[O]ver time the individual creates multiple realities connected to parts of the self, shaped in part by social roles as well as context" (613) and therefore the realities that inform identity performance are further complicated by surrounding societal, political, and cultural circumstances, and environments and spaces, specifically in the case of queer Lebanese immigrants to North America.

A queer individual's experience growing up in Lebanon requires learning how to hide and repress any performances of queerness. This mostly comes from the conservative nature of Lebanese law, specifically Article 543, which prohibits "sexual intercourse against nature" with a penalty of up to one year's imprisonment<sup>1</sup> and Article 521, which criminalizes gender expression by making it an offence for a man to "disguise himself as a woman", the penalty of which is up to six years' imprisonment<sup>2</sup> (Lebanon). As recently as 2017, "The US Department of State Human Rights Report on Lebanon stated that the law was occasionally enforced during the year" (Lebanon). This reality of a queer individual being considered a criminal within the Lebanese legal system is exacerbated not only by the country's conflation of politics and religion, where "political debate in Lebanon, it has been argued, is intrinsically based on sectarian considerations, rendering all manifestations of democratic life subject to sectarian alignment" (Mouawad) but also by the influence and control Lebanese political parties have on society, given that "one of the most successful strategies of the Lebanese political oligarchy has been its ability to keep a strong alliance going with civil society, whereby political society is at the same time part of civil society" (Mouawad). This intertwining of religion and politics, along

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<sup>1</sup> Penal Code 1943, Article 534 Sexual Intercourse Against Nature.

<sup>2</sup> Penal Code 1943, Article 521 Disguising as a Woman.

with the domination of political power over civil life, means a queer Lebanese individual inevitably exists in a culture where “the commentary obviates the binaries between holy behavior (Prophets) and... ethics and (queer) sexuality, and underlines the presumed affinity between Divine approval and male heteronormativity” (Shannahan 136). Portions of one’s identity, then, are always understood as unwelcome and potentially unsafe in their distance from the divine and accepted.

In relocating to Canada (or, more broadly, North America), whether as an immigrant or as a refugee, one faces a further complicated relationship with their upbringing and country of origin from a more outside-in perspective, as “the tension between sexuality and one’s homeland is replete with the contending experience of nostalgia and rejection” (Donica 434). In contrast to the Lebanese law regarding LGBTQI+ individuals, Canada exhibits a more liberal acceptance of the LGBTQI2+ community, it having instated the decriminalization of homosexuality with the introduction of the Criminal Law Amendment Act in 1969 and made discrimination against individuals on the basis of their sexual orientation in 1985 illegal, adding gender identity and gender expression to the charter in 2017 (Canada). This more queer-accepting society’s reception of a queer Lebanese person who is carrying the aforementioned clashing relationships with their homeland to North America might lead to one resisting any identification with their Middle Eastern upbringing while consciously shifting the performance of their cultural identity to one aimed at assimilation and “fitting in” western culture rather than Arab genuineness and authenticity. What facilitates this shift is the predominantly white heteronormative setup of North American societies that impedes diverse cultural expression.

In studying a queer immigrant’s navigation of their identity performance, both queer marginalization and racial marginalization (among other intersectional oppressions) interrelate and inform each other, and given that “intersectionality is an approach to research and theory that

forefronts the compounded impact of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other social identity categories on lived experiences within systems of power” (Johnson and LeMaster 5), an intersectional methodology is imperative in examining how an LGBTQI+ immigrant navigates the impossibility of performing their complete queer and Middle Eastern selves in either of the two places they seek to call home. Given this impossibility, any identity performance becomes inevitably apophatic, one where the performer insists on the attempt with the express knowledge that any comprehensive success can never be achieved. As Claire Maria Chambers explains, “Apophatic performances can be seen in any operation that exposes and participates in the nothingness and otherness at the heart of being” (11), placing queer immigrants’ identity performance within that apophatic framework. Since, as it is with the characters in Alameddine’s *Koolaid*s, “belonging in a place is important to developing any grounded experience of everyday life because so many of the characters’ lives have become defined by a loss of community whether because of their sexual orientation or their exile from Lebanon – or both” (Donica 444), the pressing and imperative study begins by asking how, in a time of globalization and cross-cultural oppression, migration, and assimilation, can a queer person of colour emigrating from the Lebanon to Canada, a person who cannot both fit and belong in the same place, manage the apophatic undertaking of performing facets of both queer and Lebanese portions of their identity when no one true spectator can receive and understand every aspect of that performance?

Let us burn down this city  
And build a more honourable one  
– Hamed Sinno

Through any study of a marginalized group with shared qualities or traits that could potentially group them under a certain umbrella term, when said qualities pertain to identity, sweeping universal classifications devoid of nuance have the potential to do as much to further marginalize and omit as they do to illuminate and recognize, specifically when cultural dynamics are not studied within their respective frameworks. Given the potential risks of generalization, “queer suturing of time and place establishes uneasy analogies... because nation-specific human histories can never become fully equivalent” (Carbajal 89). Consequently, attempting to understand queer experience in contemporary culture is predicated on the awareness and approach to the connections between and the intersectionality of both individual and shared queer experiences. The understanding and honouring of both the commonalities of living within a marginalized group and the singular experiences of queerness that stem from the distinct combination of variables that make up an individual are vital.

In the Middle East and, to a certain extent, most places around the world, queerness still almost ubiquitously exists in cultural and societal margins, and in these spaces, “queerness has instead existed as innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performances that are meant to be interacted with by those within its epistemological sphere – while evaporating at the touch of those who would eliminate queer possibility” (Muñoz 6). Given the commonality of these realities shared by the majority of queer individuals, two main products of living with a queer identity emerge: Firstly, a camaraderie of understanding and empathy established when queer individuals connect, for the implicit implications of what it means to live as a queer citizen is communicated within the same instant that queerness itself is revealed. Secondly, queerness grows beyond a mere signifier or portion of identity into a means through which identity itself is grown and fostered, with the individual living with “queerness as a possibility, a sense of self-knowing, a mode of sociality and relationality” (Muñoz 6). Since queerness is non-conforming to

most societal and many cultural heteronormative privileges and norms, a queer person's mere existence is inevitably an act of rebellion which informs how they view and operate in society and their world as a whole. The rebellion, the fight, the loneliness, and the subversiveness a queer person experiences in almost all present day realities are an innate part of their gained identity as they navigate societies that impose a litany of projections onto them before they perform a single action or take up a single cause. Given that a part of their identity informs how they are seen, hired, socialize, see themselves in media and society, and navigate connection, sexuality, and love, their identity, as José Esteban Muñoz explains, is no longer found just *in* queerness but *through* queerness, with the rebellion and marginalization informing how they navigate every aspect of their life and the world around them, regardless of whether such aspects are linked to their queer performance or not.

Queer experience and identity, as well as the performance of said identity, are predicated upon variables such as race, class, gender identity, and cultural identity, the latter having the most prominence within a Middle Eastern immigrant's context. As such, "uncritically applying western understandings of sexual identities and homophobias in non-western contexts creates the unintended risk of a backlash against sexual minorities rather than helping them" (Moussawi 596). Studying queer experience in Lebanon requires the extrapolation of what commonalities most queer experiences share and live with and then the focusing in on experiential elements that are specific to Lebanese life. The intersectionality within race, class, culture, and the inverted every day, where "narrative sections are constantly interrupted, thought patterns are interrupted, everyday routine is interrupted, and lives are interrupted by violence" (Donica 436), is at the core of Lebanese queer study.

Lebanon, being a colonized country and a part of the Arab World in the Middle East, has a distinction of existing in an eastern/western cultural limbo of sorts. While linguistically,

architecturally, educationally, and in sparse societal traits it bears the fruit of its French and British colonizers (to say nothing of the Ancient Romans), the political, religious, jurisdictional, and most aggressive societal norms operate in frameworks that are much more Arabic, eastern, and primal in their format and execution. For instance, while every major schooling system in Lebanon teaches either English or French alongside Arabic as languages from the kindergarten level, it is an unspoken governmental agreement that the Lebanese president must be a Christian, the Prime Minister must be a Muslim Sunni, and the Head of Parliament must be a Muslim Shiite. Lebanese queerness, then, draws from a multitude of different experiential landscapes and melds into an underground culture very specifically of its country. As with many other conservative and religio-centric cultures, underground queer gatherings are what prevail in Lebanon, and “in their distinctive queerness, these socio-spatial configurations, within which local history and culture become manifest, allow for bodily performances to confront otherwise upheld normative behaviour” (Merabet 528) . The risks involved in this confrontation being spoken out loud, however, carry punishment and pain so severe it has been considered not worth the attempt. As important as connection is to the LGBTQI+ community, “the intimate is not only central to queer subject formation, it is also the very site of an always possible violent backlash” (Merabet 528). An example Alameddine uses in *Koolaidis* is of a gay Lebanese man who enters a bathhouse in the US and has an anxiety attack upon coming face to face with another Lebanese man making sexual advances towards him. He runs out, repeating “I have never had sex with a Lebanese. I have never had sex in Lebanon” (152). This dissociation between queer sexuality and the Middle Eastern self is learned in one’s homeland and its societal upbringing, where any outward expression of intimacy between Lebanese queer individuals can illicit impulses of fear and danger. Therefore, while the few underground Lebanese gay pubs and clubs serve a much more intense and vulnerable cocoon for queer individuals to finally connect to others who

identify with them, the potential violence waiting outside cultivates a necessary double identity performance carried out by community members at all times.

An example of the Lebanese hybrid culture lies in its dichotomous approach to queerness in that “what is framed in law is not guaranteed on the street, nor in any other social space one cares to name” (Alexandrowicz 7), a reality which compounds the fear in being outed in the streets of Beirut. Even though “a district court of appeal in Lebanon issued a groundbreaking ruling on July 12, 2018, that consensual sex between people of the same sex is not unlawful” (HRW), queer people are still beaten and sometimes killed in the streets specifically for being queer with little to no repercussions to the perpetrators, as those with clout, political and religious influence, or even militia-connected members of society can very well sidestep any proper legal action taken against them. Neela Ghoshar, a senior LGBTQI2+ rights researcher has stated that “despite the positive developments in the courts, the reality is that same-sex couples can still face jail time in Lebanon” (HRW). As such, not unlike the AIDS epidemic in North America during the 1980s and 1990s, “gay men were told that to have sex was to flirt with death” (Donica 435), and by extension, to love as queer has been, to many, a death sentence.

Given the dominant religious and conservative ecosystem that governs how society functions in Lebanon, models of queerness are not shown in media or in any position of power, imposing an isolation and lack of reference for individuals exploring who they are. What exacerbates such isolation, however, is the dearth (if not complete absence) of documented Lebanese queer history. Gayatri Gopinath speaks of “those queer histories, practices, subjectivities, and desires that mark the space of the region and that are occluded and deemed inconsequential not only within Lebanon’s history but within dominant nationalist historiography” (327) and how this loss not only paints an inaccurate picture of the country’s history, but further isolates its queer citizens. Any LGBTQI+ individual growing up in Lebanon

must not only face the threat of violence, exile, and disownment, but also grows up having no representation or precedent to who they are and identify as. After the passing of a gay man's Lebanese mother in *Koolaid's*, her daughter writes a friend who had asked for the mother's diaries, which contain intimate feelings about her son's sexuality and AIDS diagnosis, to be published. In the daughter's letter, she writes, "A person's life is kept very private in our culture. Although we tend to be emotional people, we do not reveal personal feelings or share them. Any kind of personal revelation is treated with disdain. Lebanese society would ostracize the perpetrator and their family" (Alameddine 215). This cultural model of repressing emotion and avoiding mention of queerness or any subject that is considered problematic or inappropriate in Lebanon helps explain the historical omission of a nation's entire community and reinforces the massive significance such exclusions have on a Lebanese queer person's identity formation. It brands any queer act as not merely one of rebellion, but of leadership, control, and pioneering, the combination of which further colours the lens through which queer Lebanese people navigate their everyday life.

Felix Lang spoke of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, describing,

15 years of fighting, pitting against each other, in various constellations, right-wing Christian militias, pro-Palestinian leftist, and largely Muslim groups and Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli armies, brought the structures of the state on the verge of collapse and had millions of Lebanese live under what Robert Fisk has described as a "Mafia system" safeguarded by the various armed groups-in other words, the war profoundly marked individual lives and society (2).

Even in Lebanese schools, "until today, the official history curriculum omits the civil war, the argument being that Lebanon's internal divisiveness, susceptibility to foreign meddling, and reconciliation efforts make it impossible to assert a unified narrative of this bloody episode"

(Hout 59). Since 1990, Lebanese citizens have still lived in a state of ubiquitous turmoil and violence due to events which included but were not limited to: the assassination of prime minister Rafiq el Hariri in 2005 and the multiple political assassinations that followed<sup>3</sup>, the Hezbollah- Israeli war in 2006<sup>4</sup>, the civil disturbances and violence in 2008<sup>5</sup>, and the explosion at the port in 2020<sup>6</sup>.<sup>2</sup> To live in in a country rife with such continuous trauma is to exist in a constant assault on the everyday.

Historically and overarchingly, “the everyday has been used to indicate a distinction from the extraordinary events that break up the mundane-ness of everyday life” (Donica 427), yet when extraordinary events that involve a continuous battle for survival or fear of harm or death happen with a degree of frequency that is not altogether extraordinary, the generalized definition of everyday life is inverted, and priorities violently shift, necessarily repressing many important matters to make way for the crucial task of survival. During the 2006 Hezbollah- Israel War, where “in one month, the Israeli army had destroyed all of the key bridges and overpasses in the country, all three runways of Beirut’s international airport, roads, power plants, cell phone towers, and factories. The attack killed more than 1200 civilians (50% were children), wounded

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-tribunal-hariri-assassination-idUSKCN2500LQ>,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/feb/14/lebanon>, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-10-22/lebanons-assassinations-timeline>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://english.alarabiya.net/features/2016/07/15/The-2006-Lebanon-War-Hezbollah-s-expensive-victory-ten-years-on>, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-2006-lebanon-war-a-short-history>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-strike-idUSL0761005520080507>,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/10/world/middleeast/10lebanon.html>,  
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/may/11/lebanon>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-53668493>, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02361-x>.

4400, and displaced over a million (a quarter of the population)” (Naber and Zaatari 94), a single deployed bomb had the capacity to demolish entire buildings and in a single night, neighborhoods were decimated. In circumstances this dire and saturated with fear, the national and cultural impulse for safety mostly lies within two established communities: family and country.

Nadine Naber and Zeina Zaatari comment on how “communities threatened by militarized crises respond with the logic of emergency that inadvertently colludes with this campaign to flatten out social complexity and marginalize those whose experiences do not fit in binarized political hierarchies” (92). Both family and country are the two largest and most central hubs of belonging in Lebanon (and the Arab culture as a whole), both operate in an almost purely male-dominated heteronormative framework, and both are deemed necessary as refuge and a trauma response mechanism during events like war, specifically when this trauma becomes a repetitive cycle in everyday life. A chapter in *Koolaid's* illustrates this feeling of remoteness caused by the inversion of the everyday in a character’s commentary on western news coverage of the war, as they remark, “They forget about us. Israel attacks Lebanon, it is the front page news. They kill children in an ambulance, it still is news. They bomb a UN shelter killing 105 civilians, it gets reported. The fighting goes on for a week, it gets moved back to page three. It goes on for two weeks, more people die, and it is no longer news” (Alameddine 153). Given this repetitive sense of isolation and helplessness, connection to a world outside the raging war and incessant trauma is severed. Any attempt to feel relatively “safe” for so many queer Lebanese individuals during war seems reduced to succumbing to the communal frameworks of nation and family, thereby suppressing any queer performance that might estrange or endanger them further and sacrificing that portion of their identity in exchange for the most basic feeling of physical and emotional sanctuary.

In addition to the self-imposed repression of one's sexuality (crucial for one's safety when not at war but especially imperative during times of violence and trauma), the Lebanese assault on the everyday mandated a de-prioritization of one's queerness. When political turmoil and war are constantly raging or at the risk of raging, "an overly simplistic reduction of priorities to issues of 'life and death' falsely compartmentalizes questions of gender, sexuality, race, and class as superfluous luxuries compared with the bare needs of food, shelter, and safety – when in fact, the very organization, definition, and distribution of such essential needs is structured by those very relations" (Naber and Zaatari 106). For so many, growing up in Lebanon during or after the Lebanese civil war meant being raised in a country that threatens violence to one's mere existence, forces one to disown their queer identity performance in order to find sanctuary in one's family unit, and inverts everyday life so that in extraordinary events where survival and basic needs are always in demand and it constantly feels like "a luxury to demand feminist or LGBTQ concerns during these moments" (Naber and Zaatari 97). Consequently, most queer Lebanese citizens grow up vying for control, peaceful self-expression, and a sense of communal belonging where performing one's identity is, if not celebrated, accepted and allowed.

It's a city of strangers

– Stephen Sondheim

Upon arriving to North America, a Lebanese immigrant has "claimed a second tradition that has complicated the present with ideas and experiences from other times, other shores, and other languages" (Waldmeir 14), and they immediately come face to face with conflicting forms of being. Alameddine tackles this struggle in *Koolaid's* in writing about two young women who grew up in Lebanon and immigrated. As he writes, "The girls are part of the war generation. They left Lebanon and saw the world. Would they be able to make the adjustments or would the

country accommodate them?” (79), Alameddine identifies the struggle between assimilation and authenticity, and between belonging and control. Though modes of arrival are different, a near-ubiquitous “search for identity and home intensif[ies] for Arab Americans and displaced Middle Eastern immigrants and refugees” (Pazargadi 55). This search manifests differently in many queer immigrants, for the most imminent and urgent conflict lies between the desire to finally allow their queer expression to thrive in a safer and more inclusive environment and the resistance to the letting go of homeland-related trauma that has now become intertwined with a prominent sense of cultural identity. In potentially compromising one for the other, as Dalia Abdelhady observes, a “lack of belonging to the host society [is] also coupled with a sense of alienation from the homeland that the immigrants left behind. These immigrants’ sense of difference in their homeland resulted from the way they got labeled as ‘foreign’ by people in Lebanon” (549). By identifying these opposing impulses held by queer immigrants, these individuals begin to gravitate toward assimilation to a new and foreign society as a means of achieving control and freedom over how they express their queer identity. By labelling themselves openly as a member of the North American queer community, queer immigrants become active participants in how western queer culture performs itself in society.

In these conscious acts of integration, the danger of a universal classification of queerness returns in its prevalence. “While, to some extent, a globalization of gay identity has occurred, giving rise to the figure of the global gay,” as Robert Leckey and Kim Brooks note, “that figure is a hegemonic yet unstable point of self-identification.” They continue, “Subjects who so identify may be simultaneously privileged and marginalized, local and global, indigenous and cosmopolitan” (8). Back in Lebanon, many individuals experienced an “idiosyncratic queer formation which is inextricable from the history of war and resistance, militarization and occupation” (Gopinath 330), and that history and depth is carried within a portion of their

identity as they immigrate. What queerness means, requires, and how it manifests differ so greatly from a Middle Eastern to a North American experience, specifically when understanding that “[m]inoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self” (Muñoz 5). Through this prism, queerness is not an independent portion of one’s identity, but a product of many intertwining perspectives through which one discovers and fosters their identity. A queer person living in Lebanon shapes many portions of who they are and how they operate through the inextricable combination of interactions and societal, cultural, and interpersonal navigations that their homeland culture and upbringing imply, all of which can vary from a North American experience. A Lebanese member of the LGBTQI2+ community must therefore compromise, along with other identity elements, parts of their own queer self in their attempt to belong to a more western and white-centric queer culture. In many cases, however, that is not a big ask. When queerness has, in numerous cases, been associated with oppression, silence, sin, and shunning, many Lebanese LGBTQI+ people do not hesitate to compromise portions of their Lebanese queerness for a chance to fit into a more open and welcoming North American queer community. This decision is further validated and facilitated by Lebanese and Arab queer immigrants’ covert knowledge and consumption of queer culture through media and research coming exclusively from western and white-centric sources. Steven Seidman explains, “Many Lebanese, especially among the middle and upper classes, have been exposed to American and British gay, lesbian, and queer life through popular culture, academia, the internet, travel, or living abroad” (497). Ghassan Moussawi similarly remarks, “[queer Lebanese people] uncritically accept and apply western categories of sexuality and hence do not root their organizing strategies within their local contexts” (611). Therefore, in an attempt to belong, Lebanese queer people reject and repress elements of their cultural identity and become “those who hide their otherness away to protect it from the relentless pursuit of oneness”

(Waldmeir 15). Prioritizing fitting in above standing out as themselves and forefronting their performance of western queer identity become efforts to overcompensate for the lived trauma of repression Lebanese queer immigrants had lived through in their home country.

Apart from queer performance, selective Lebanese identity performance permeates a queer Lebanese immigrant's interactions and relationships in their new North American dwelling. If one were to insist on a more authentically Middle Eastern and Arab identity performance in western society, "people could revolutionize their everyday lives from a string of routine activities so that real self-expression could emerge. But as a capitalist system reproduces itself, so too do the daily activities that capitalism depends on its adherents performing" (Donica 430). A Middle Eastern immigrant, then, must concede to the rules and boundaries of western society in order to successfully adapt and thrive within it.

Queer Lebanese immigrants, in another attempt at fitting into white-dominant Canadian culture, work on making connections in English and with English references and cadences to expedite a feeling of belonging. As Nadra Majeed Assaf observes, "even in a face-to-face conversation, relations among the beings as well as between the linguistic communities play a role in delivering the message, thereby uniting the speaker and the listener" (237). Because Lebanese people are generally fluent in at least two languages given the set-up of the education system in Lebanon, and, further, given that linguistic "code-switching is very common among multilingual speakers" (Hout 278), a Lebanese immigrant is primed to breach most language communication barriers with relative ease. Provided this fluency, the media intake that comes from Lebanese culture allows for the consumption of North American images of culture performance which carry with them the potential imperative to emulate behaviours, patterns, rhythms, and cadences one witnesses on television, film, and other mediatized sources available

in the Middle East<sup>7</sup>. It is then easy to perform constructed imitations of said behaviours in order to facilitate and streamline assimilation within North American culture, a conscious practise that potentially unconsciously mandates cultural code-switching along with purely linguistic code-switching. As such, “individuals make decisions about how to adapt to different contextual pressures, in terms of expressing identity” (Chraibi et. al 627). Considering the prevalence of the white, Eurocentric, heteronormative structure of Canadian colonial and societal tradition, this decision making forces, in many instances of identity performance, at least a partial erasure of one’s culture, specifically since elements of that culture have been painful and traumatic.

The mediatization of performing identity – which has become even more prevalent with the explosion of social media – has played its part in further alienating queer immigrants while ironically touting a platform of inclusion and diversity. As José van Dijck observes, “initially, platforms like Facebook were commonly regarded as a space for (personal) *self-expression* and for making connections between friends. Gradually, users have come to understand the art of online self-presentation and the importance of [social network services] as tools for (professional) *self-promotion*” (200). Within the paradigms of apps such as Instagram, Twitter,

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<sup>7</sup> Lebanese mainstream pop culture media insists on staying away from most taboo subjects which include “politics, the country’s civil war, Zionism, religion, and homosexuality” (Owens). As such, North American pop culture media consumed in Lebanon contains elements of sexuality and political discourse not found in Lebanese counterparts. Moreover, local films, tv shows, and theatre productions face local censorship mandating that “works should not ‘pose any danger or harm to Lebanon,’ nor should they upset ‘political or military sensitivities’ or incite ‘sectarian factional discord’ (Khoury). As such, the rigidity of the censorship applied to Lebanese media is more stringent than that of imported western media, even when some western films and tv shows have been banned from being shown in Lebanon entirely, such as *The Post* (Ajami), *The Da Vinci Code*, and *Persepolis* (Khoury) among others.

and the like, “promoting and branding the self has also become a normalized, accepted phenomenon in ordinary people’s lives” (203). With this branding, online identity has become a consciously performed construct, one which is manipulated by computerized and profitable algorithms, mostly founded by white men<sup>8</sup>. In addition to the branding of normative identities, social media platforms reward polish, veneer, and the outward artifice of perfection, all defined by the societies these platforms market to, which, in the case of North America, is mostly white heteronormativity. Queer people of colour then, purely by their existence in the margins, are at a predisposed disadvantage in their gain from these platforms, which further forces Lebanese LGBTQI+ members residing in Canada to outwardly erase and exclude parts of themselves, conforming to the notion that “people deal with conflicting identities by resisting one and bringing another to the fore” (Åkerström et al 104). What social media fueled messages have also done is expose the inauthenticity and illusion of the hegemony of the white heteronormative North American society at the expense of all others, and the self-estrangement arising from this partial cultural erasure brings forth a new identity struggle to overcome.

In joining North American queer culture at the expense of cultural elements of one’s own homeland identity, as well as the code-switching compromise that arises from establishing a more efficient connection that is less imbued with post-traumatic elements, a Lebanese immigrant eventually comes face to face with new “trauma triggered by the loss of the comforting illusion – the sense of being part of an anonymous yet consoling oneness” (Abuawad 91-92). Two traumas come face to face: that of not belonging and that of realizing that any

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<sup>8</sup> Founders: Facebook (Mark Zuckerberg), Instagram (Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger), LinkedIn (Reid Hoffman), Snpachat (Reggie Brown), and Twitter (Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Evan Williams, and biz Stone).

belonging in spaces where one must compromise a profound part of who they are is counterfeit. In a desperate desire for control and expression of that which has been unallowed, many queer immigrants have adopted an identity performance of partial erasure and concession, a reactionary act aimed at establishing a new sense of normalcy. That normalcy, being built on a degree self-suppression, provides little authentic comfort since “after the crisis...one cannot seek an equivalent or even comparable logic to the one that existed prior to it” (Abuawad 98). *Koolaid's* Mohammad is the prime example of this struggle.

As the novel's main character, Mohammad is a gay Lebanese painter who has immigrated to the USA and is dying of AIDS. Through narrative fragments narrated by him or about him by his friends and acquaintances, “we are at once made aware of the intersection of identities that Mohammad embodies and dwells within” (Shannahan 130). In his final days, Mohammad is in constant pain from the virus, and as much as he tries to resist confronting his Lebanese self, he admits, “I can't think in English. It's back to my roots. I now think and dream only in Arabic” (Alameddine 1). Syrine C. Hout explains, “Memories are likely to be elicited and recollected in the language in which the emotional event occurred” (293), and when a queer immigrant views the Lebanese parts of themselves as other simply because they are now separated from their country of origin, they may operate under the assumption that they are now distanced from that which they are choosing not to perform socially, when the truth is that these same shunned identity portions are still intrinsically part of who they are. Therefore, “there will be no ‘away’ to pollute, no ‘other’ to exploit in which we are not implicated – and no imaginary baseline ‘normal’ against which deviance is gauged” (Tamas 59). Looking back upon his life, Mohammad narrates, “I tried so hard to rid myself of anything Lebanese. I hate everything Lebanese. But I never could. It seeps through my entire being. The harder I tried, the more it showed up in the unlikeliest of places” (Alameddine 244). This surrender to the impossibility of

completely ridding oneself from either the Lebanese or queer portions of one's identity, no matter how far they may be pushed into the background, is a vital example that "while hybrid identity might be a counterpart to liminality, it is nonetheless, a difficult experience to navigate" (Pazargadi 52).

What exacerbates this instability is that it goes unnoticed so long as the individual is unaware of where this sense of loss comes from, for "when identity markers are made less visible, for example, when racialized individuals 'pass' as part of the dominant culture by adopting mainstream behaviors, this may become a strategy for survival" (Chraibi et. al 627). Many Lebanese individuals particularly, having been raised in a country that has been heavily colonized by England and France, have both features and education that allow them an efficiency in assimilation which is used as another manifestation of a well-trained survival instinct. Even Mohammad himself comments, "It's really easy for me to switch between two languages" (Alameddine 2). As such, addressing the instability of their identity performance in North American culture requires a new-founded avenue of resistance and revolution in going against societal norms by asserting and expressing a multi-faceted identity without shame or compromise.

Little boy lost

In search of little boy found

– Alan and Marilyn Bergman

In navigating stepping into performing a more authentic and complete identity, a queer Lebanese immigrant is met with one glaring contradiction: its complete possibility. As Judith

Butler asserts, “to speak within the system is to be deprived of the possibility of speech; hence, to speak at all in that context is a performative contradiction, the linguistic assertion of a self that cannot ‘be’ within the language that asserts it” (158). On one hand, to embrace the fullness of Lebanese culture in one’s homeland, one compromises the possibility of expressing queerness in a completely safe and acceptable way – let alone in a fully Lebanese way, as there is little (if any) coherent precedent. On the other hand, to allow one’s cultural expression (which includes queer identity performance) to exist in North America dictates that several spectators or audience members will not understand all cultural references and depth – from language barriers to specific and singular Middle Eastern allusions and cadences that are inevitably lost in translation.

Within these seeming impossibilities lies a totality that cannot be completely accessed or achieved. In accepting these impossibilities rather than resisting them, however, a queer Lebanese immigrant can step into the complexities and intersectionality of portions of their identity they had previously felt the necessity to hide or compromise. In doing so, they reveal a person who, despite the inability to express both their queerness and Arabness fully, insists on the attempt, embracing the gaps and dead angles inscribed within their self-performance, for “to travel into the gaps that exist within someone’s life – especially within the lives of those who exist between two homes – is to journey into the spaces where otherness is stored” (Waldmeir 15). Otherness ceases to become an act of self-repression, but rather a constant negotiation between portions of identity where different performances get amplified while others fade into the background; a circumstance-based balancing act of self-performance. There remains, however, the unrelenting apophatic desire for one to perform all of themselves in their everyday lives. This apophatic drive, what Claire Maria Chambers defines as “trying again when sure of defeat” (11), is a necessary aspect of awareness that must exist in the healthy navigation of cross-cultural queer expression. Chambers explains, “To deny the denial, to negate the negation, and to

resist the resistance – this forces one into a place where no action, no speech, and no event can ensure communication” (5). In understanding that, one is liberated from the burden of failure and is aware of the inevitable impossibility of their task while never ceasing its attempt. In *Koolaid's*, Mohammad himself expresses this constant attempt at knowing the unknowable by repeating, “I yearn for a moment I know nothing of” (Alameddine 186).

Performance apophatics are tied to the queer immigrant’s narrative, specifically in relation to those who are post-traumatic survivors of war. In the endeavour to understand their own narrative, the reliance on memory and nostalgia to procure truth actually delivers diminishing returns given that, according to Karim Abuawad, “Memory initiates the past into the present by the repetition of bygone events. With each repetition, the imperfections of memory begin to show themselves through differences that start to surface as small discrepancies before such discrepancies become even larger” (101). Narrative as truth, then, is inevitably a process of weaving a tapestry of selective recollections that keep carrying one further away from unknowable empirical truth. Yet, the constant leaning into writing one’s narrative is an act of performance where “to perform is to not know” (Chambers 1).

A constant in the diversity of the human condition is the inability for each singular individual to think, communicate, and perform exactly as another. Regardless of identity differences, cultural or otherwise, “each living human being has a manner in which [they] think and perceive that is slightly the same or even slightly different than every other human being thus allowing the existence of a struggle to be both heard and understood” (Assaf 257). Any attempt, then, to be completely understood in communication and expression is an impossible act, yet one which members of each functioning society still attempt every day. The queer immigrant narrative takes this disconnect in communication a step further in living and operating within margins which, by their mere existence, create gaps in a community member’s ability to

ever fully perform who they are in front of a receptive audience. The queer immigrant, within the apophatic framework, resembles “the actor who, about to step on stage for the fiftieth, one hundredth, two hundredth time, discovers something new and vital about her character” (Chambers 10-11). When identity performance is deliberate and self-aware, every interaction is a stepping on stage, a step further into finding oneself and being oneself completely, and one of the safest spaces to fully lean into this endeavour potentially exists in art.

Artistic performance of identity requires a knowledge of creative and theatrical preconceptions of performance, a self-awareness that comes to and from artistic expression and a conscious intention to subvert artistic norms in an effort to move towards creating new and evolved models by embracing the necessarily apophatic nature of these performances. Conventionally, “the actor is inescapably an eroticised object in the gaze of the audience, and is required to purvey heteronormative gender performances in order to vindicate mainstream definitions of attractiveness, glamour, and success” (Alexandrowicz 12). In deliberately utilizing art as a statement that transgresses these exclusive expectations, a queer immigrant artist’s performance becomes a method of both showcasing one’s identity and exposing the impossibility of this communication’s complete reception. As opposed to some everyday communication that may necessitate compromise, the stage or palette is a space in which the artist can make the constant choice to perform themselves fully, where losing elements, words, and references in translation becomes in and of itself a part of that performance.

Before stepping onstage, an artist should be aware of both artistic and theatrical conventions and the prerequisites to creating and engaging with the performance of identity. How audiences have been taught to experience performance depends, in part, on their foresight, which Nadra Majeed Assaf defines as “a combination of what is already known and experienced with what is expected to emerge” (237). The intersection of preconception and foresight is what

a queer immigrant artist challenges in opening up the possibilities stemming from what is expected from a society and culture of diversity and inclusion. Through leaning into the knowledge that portions of one's identity, in their artistic manifestation, are released to an audience for consumption and interpretation, the queer Lebanese artist can allow the art itself to be a vessel of meaning and impact that is not limited to the artist's intention and personal narrative, but one that expands beyond that to relate to the unique portions of identity in each spectator who may have been wary of or afraid to address or perform themselves. A perfect example is from a section of *Koolaid's* narrated by a Lebanese man who is at an art gallery admiring one of Mohammad's paintings along with his American lover, Mark and a gallery employee, Jack. The following exchange begins with Mark's observation:

"I love his abstractions more than his realistic paintings," he said.

"I have never seen his abstract paintings," I said.

Both Mark and Jack looked at me strangely. "These are abstract paintings, dear," Mark said.

"Oh, really?" I was embarrassed. I really did not know much about art. "I thought if you could tell what they are, they are not abstract."

"Can you tell what these are?" Mark asked. "They are all just paintings with irregular rectangles."

"Oh sure, but they are sides of our houses. That's what they look like in our villages. He painted them beautifully. I can see the stones clearly. That's how the stones look back home. Exactly that yellow color"...

I thought it was clear as day. That is why I found the paintings beautiful. They were of my home village. They were of every village, Druze, Christian, or Muslim. He had captured Lebanon. They were so beautiful. Mohammad, by

placing these large paintings around the gallery, had turned the place into a Lebanese village. Finally, someone was telling the tale of my home. He did not skip over it (Alameddine 101-102).

A deep connection is immediately made, given Mohammad's narrative and struggle, between the artist's work and the parts of his identity which he is attempting to reject, for "art has replaced the identity he lost from exile from Lebanon" (Donica 437). An artist's effort, though not always understood as intended by every audience member, is nonetheless a potentially vital and profound source of identity performance in its most authentic form. Mohammad's awareness that "the actual audience that views our work consists not only of the audience we intended to view our work" (Assaf 234) and therefore what is successfully communicated and how it is received is not completely within the artist's control allows him to more safely engage with his traumatic upbringing rather than hide it. As Joseph Donica notes, "Art in *Koolaid's* is not escapism. It has dynamic potential" (430), and therefore art where one performs portions of their identity honestly, theatrically or through painting, is a vulnerable undertaking, one that requires balancing authenticity and openness with self-protection and awareness in order for it to succeed healthily.

In writing, creating, and expressing an artistic manifestation of the remnants of trauma, whether it be brought on by queerness, immigration, or a combination of the two (alongside others, in many cases), the intention of the artist is "not simply to dispute the questionable premises that initially contributed to the crisis but to use the fragmented parts of those premises as the material for creating an alternative style of articulation" (Abuawad 105). This constructs an attempt to present a full, singular, specific person who identifies as queer and as a person of colour, and yet does not necessarily subscribe to all predetermined traits, qualities, and assumptions that come along with these identifiers, nor do they speak for all queer immigrants

and their individual experiences in their attempt at connecting to their audience. Claire Maria Chambers explains, “When we perform for one another or for ourselves, we likewise cannot equate the performance of culture, or of identity, or of community, with the instantiation of those things, lest we find ourselves artificially limiting culture, identity, and community to the performance itself” (5). For so many marginalized individuals, identifying openly as a member of a minority of any kind can imply a tacet representation of the entirety of that label or community, a broad brushstroke that dilutes and erases individuality and complex humanity. Jamil Khoury remarks that “deconstructing stereotypes provides us with agency and opportunity. We can introduce ourselves on our terms, along with our hopes, fears, triumphs, defeats, challenges, and dreams” (92). The complexities of singularity are prominently on display, aiming to unshackle the artist from being the value representative of the queer community and Lebanese culture while still having both be an inseparable part of their identity as they lean into “the boundless possibilities of remaking frustrating everyday experiences into a reassertion of identity” (Donica 433).

In addition to artistic ventures and explorations and, in many cases, stemming from them, the discourse on identity expression requires elevation and amplification, whether it be in academic institutions, artistic workplaces, or societies as a whole. Given the generalizations and stereotypes that pervade western societies and how “fitting in” is covertly indicative of conforming to white heteronormative behaviours, “it’s tricky balancing desires to be ‘normal,’ ‘likeable,’ and ‘unthreatening’ alongside the realities of being ‘complicated,’ ‘multi-dimensional,’ and ‘culturally specific’ (Khoury 91). As such, the reexamination and reconfiguration of these societal rules and frameworks must take place in all spaces. Academically, there is a massive contradiction between the rigidity and severity of the rules in the institution followed by scholars who study, write about, and champion artists and

revolutionaries specifically because of their breaking rules and transcending limitations. In educating, asks Conrad Alexandrowicz , “[H]ow can we discriminate against student actors who deviate from the codes of normative gender presentation while operating within institutions that explicitly forbid discrimination of all kinds?” (12). Autoethnography is gaining popularity among scholars because “evidence’s limit becomes clearly visible when we attempt to describe and imagine contemporary identities that do not fit into a single preestablished archive of evidence” (Muñoz 9). The importance of these works operates not only to the benefit of the groups or individuals or identities they speak of, but rather in the knowledge that non-typical identities are being spoken of and written about in the first place, opening up academic institutions to actual inclusion in a tangible way.

Within artistic workplaces, the writing of marginalized characters demands much more nuance in its approach, specifically with a focus on the inclusion but not generalization and dependence on identity performance. Michael Malek Najjar explains,

[T]he integral changes made are those acting choices that include use of accent, the desire to capture the Arabic language as perfectly as possible, the focus on creating multi-dimensional (rather than stereotypical) characters, drawing from personal experiences for character choices, and a desire to represent Arabs and Arab Americans in a manner by which they have felt they have not been properly portrayed in prior portrayals (100).

These practices are not overly challenging to implement, for the interplay between “fitting in” and “belonging” already has the potential to flourish within the more diverse western communities. Additionally, “identity negotiation takes place in intercultural, intracultural, and co-cultural settings where individuals and group members uncover commonalities in order to

function within dominant society while validating the vast multiplicity of experiences between and among groups” (Johnson and LeMaster 9).

I pine for a feeling, an impression of myself as content, fulfilled.

– Rabih Alameddine

Identity negotiation and performance for queer immigrants is an apophatic act, one that cannot be completely fulfilled yet one that cannot be avoided. Living through and in compounding layers of marginalization, queer immigrants are at a constant crossroads of selective partial identity performance. Though no two individuals are alike, identity performance is not always meant to be fully understood by its audience; rather, it is merely to be witnessed and held with value and reverence. The first step towards achieving that is the collective audiences’ acknowledgement that “no essentialist language – no single ‘essence,’ ideal, or narrative – can account for the experience of all. Therefore, the best we can hope for is the ongoing negotiation of perspectives: the endless effort to remind one another that stories of violence are embedded in others that may appear to represent a retreat from anger and hatred” (Waldmeir 150). Whether it be in a slowly advancing and passionate society like Lebanon where in the 2018 May elections, “nearly 100 electoral candidates publicly [sic] called for the decriminalisation of homosexuality” (Lebanon), or in a more queer-friendly and diverse society like Canada, which “stands up for the protection and promotion of the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, 2-spirit and intersex (LGBTQ2I) people globally” (Canada), a queer immigrant always exists within the gaps in identity performance. They are repeatedly attempting to be their complete selves by addressing these gaps in spaces where they cannot be fully understood, and yet “to lay claim to an absence from a key segment of one’s narrative also

marks the moment of beginning to reconstruct that very segment discursively, an action that has therapeutic connotations” (Abuawad 97).

John Waldmeir proclaims: “Our stories are ongoing. Not only are they never finished, they are rarely begun; or, more precisely, they are begun over and over again, and with each start we learn something new about ourselves and one another” (160). Jamil Khoury asserts: “We don’t simply want to enter the mainstream, we want to help define the mainstream” (94). A movement is on the rise, one in which queer immigrants and other marginalized individuals are taking the reins of their identities, understanding how their trauma and oppression have manifested in their prioritizing assimilation over authenticity and how this has led them to silence parts of their own voice for survival, stability, and self-preservation. In *Koolaid*s, the closest Mohammad gets to a sense of completeness, to approaching that impossible moment he yearns for, is his art. In the characters of Alameddine’s novel, as it is in many examples of queer Lebanese immigrants, “belonging in a place is important to developing any grounded experience of everyday life because so many of the characters’ lives have become defined by a loss of community whether because of their sexual orientation or their exile from Lebanon – or both” (Donica 444). Queer immigrant artists are therefore creating homes for themselves in the spaces between belonging and fitting in, and they are allowing themselves, and in turn, each other, to take up their rightful uncompromised space in the gaps between cultures, sexual orientations, and identities, all in a never-ending attempt to touch home. The uprising of institutions’ undercommons and the artistic complexities of identity performance are beginning to find their rightful place in newly defined and reconfigured societies, with the unassailable intention to fully communicate, even through the inability to fully communicate, that “to recognize as home a place to which one has never been, to meet one’s love again for the first time, to finally become what one has always known oneself to be – the process of recognition...occurs outside a linear

conception of knowledge and learning. Instead, it occurs within a circular notion of homecoming that is a becoming whole” (Chamber 59).

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