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Radical Queer Epistemic Network: Kurdish Diaspora, Futurity, and Sexual Politics

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which London's queer Kurdish activists imagine Kurdistan(s) and their relation to politics surrounding Kurdish and queer struggles in the United Kingdom. In doing so, the article draws attention to a "radical queer epistemic network" that establishes a transnational link among/across different borders of queer communities in the United Kingdom, such as race and class; "homeland" and "hostland"; present and future. Although there are works focusing on the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and the United Kingdom, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to queer voices and epistemologies. How do Kurdish queer subjects negotiate ethnic, gender and sexual identities whilst imagining and (re)constructing the homeland, hostland, and politics? How do queer Kurds assert their existence and make alliances in the United Kingdom's political sphere? Can these experiences subvert the orientalist gaze directed towards queer Middle Easterners while critiquing the existing oppressive structures that affect them? This article sheds light not only on the experiences of a segment of the queer Middle East diaspora community in London but also on the mobilisation of the diasporic sexual impulsions within the political sphere through an auto-ethnographic account from London Pride 2017, contributing to the deconstruction of a presumed monolithic group, namely the Kurdish diaspora.

Keywords: *LGBT; queer; Kurds; London; diaspora.*

Introduction

On a sweltering day in July 2017, a group of queer activists[2] dismantled the fences that demarcated the London Pride march route and hijacked the front of the Pride march. It was a visible border violation, a political one just like any border violation. What it displayed was an objection to, or making visible of, the many symbolic and concrete borders that designate, define, and limit the norms to become *acceptable* (Anzaldúa, 2013).

I found myself among the protestors that violated London Pride's rigid borders, which I attended with a bunch of Kurdish and Turkish activists, in solidarity with Istanbul Pride, which had been banned since 2015 under the Erdoğan regime. We waited under the direct sunlight while more experienced activists, those holding a British passport, and/or (passing as) "white" were negotiating with the security to ensure our unexpected appearance would result in us being the leading group of the march. All activists on site had various—not necessarily intersecting at first sight—objections, claims, and demands. What brought us together was a transnational objection, and imagination of a just future. An objection to the global rise of right-wing populism and

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[2] These activists included Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants, anti-war activists, Solidarity with Istanbul Pride group (which later evolved into an initiative called maqfa [Mesopotamian and Anatolian Queers for Azadî]), among many other groups and individuals.

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authoritarianism that reinforces racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. An objection to a highly commercialised celebration made possible in the absence of racialised and criminalised queer bodies and politics.[3] While protesting the neoliberal co-optation of Pride, its ever-growing unwelcoming structure and the lack of inclusion, "particularly of black and minority ethnic communities" (Khomami, 23 February 2018), as well as highlighting "the class issue" that is often neglected in queer analyses, those activists were claiming space, politics, and the future. The protest was a succinct example as to how political and sexual oppressions are inextricably intertwined.

The political climate was intense at the time, and the intermingling slogans were being echoed by different groups within the wider group. At the time, in the United Kingdom, Prime Minister Theresa May's conservative government was establishing an alliance with the Democratic Union Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland to ensure a confidence and supply agreement. The objections to this and the tensions that emerged following this were understandable since the DUP is known to have "a long history of opposing human rights for sexual minorities" (Duggan, 2008: 41). I recall chanting the famed Kurdish slogan "Jin, jiyan, azadî!" (Women, life, freedom), which was echoing with those who were chanting the rhythmic "No DUP, no May, they're racist, sexist, anti-gay" slogan.

Timidly wondering about their political claims, I remember myself quickly scanning various activist groups to decipher the complexity of the moment. We did not know each other's histories, but what we did know was the effect, and wounds, perhaps, those histories had left on us. The moment opened a window for us to see each other's struggles, which significantly enabled the formation of an epistemic network.[4] The radical queers'[5] epistemic network consisted of different struggles' and histories' embodiment in the form of protest, which involved resistance tools such as vocabularies, chants, bodily movements, objections, and tactics. The radical queer epistemic network then became an interactive resource for us, always open to contestation, from which we could lend and borrow tools of resistance vis-à-vis multiple oppressive structures; and seek and provide care. It also facilitated forming a common radical agenda that is cognizant of differences and of the multiplicity of identity attachments. In doing so, we simultaneously become a discursive community.[6] The network I propose can also be understood as the bonds that tie together this discursive community of radical queer activists.

The bond we established was particularly centred around the potentiality of a future in which we are all worth moral respect and just legal statuses. If the current political climate was made possible by some authoritarian networks reinforcing each other—such as those of Turkey's Erdoğan, India's Modi, the Philippines' Duterte, Venezuela's Maduro, the United States' Trump, the United Kingdom's May, among others—perhaps, then, what we need is to invest in a network that is claimed, informed and transformed by radical queer activists who object to the authoritarian networks' intersecting policies of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. What is striking—or telling—is that the Pride *protest* that I sketch out has not been covered in mainstream news and

[3] Jin Haritaworn (2015) highlights how "gay friendliness" is constructed through xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism and the 'war on terror' discourse during the neo-liberal co-optation of *queerness*.

[4] This article owes much to the conversation I try to initiate between the "communicative turn" in Critical Theory (see Benhabib, 1992; Ray, 1993), and "intersectionality" (see Collins and Bilge, 2016; Watkins Liu, 2018), however, the scope does not allow for a more detailed discussion of the insights of these frameworks.

[5] Radical, in the sense that the claims and imaginations transcend state boundaries.

[6] "Discursive communities can emerge *whenever* and *wherever* human beings can affect one another's actions and well-being, interests or identity." (Benhabib, 2002)

has been disregarded as a subject of analysis in contemporary diaspora studies. Notwithstanding this negligence, the encounters of radical queer activists from diverse backgrounds hold great potential for transformative politics, and for a site in which "the excluded"[7] speak back to the state, their communities, and to the authoritarian networks mentioned above.

The placard I was holding read "I am waving my rainbow flag for Istanbul Pride." It was my first summer away from Istanbul since I left Turkey, and a bitter feeling of longing and despair was enveloping me, bolstering my resentment against the ban on Istanbul Pride in addition to other human rights violations under the Erdoğan regime, especially against the Kurds. Although at first the slogans and chants didn't seem to become quieter, my sense of presence was constantly being disrupted by a spatial confusion, and I remember the sounds fading out. My body was experiencing some sort of disorientation.

The noticeably heterogeneous group that marched was supporting the migrants, was in solidarity with Istanbul Pride, with Iranian queers, and with those who were denied asylum in the United Kingdom. Activists were against militarisation, commercialisation, and racism. Within that group, the distinction between them and us, you and I, and between the United Kingdom, Turkey and Kurdistan were blurred. All of a sudden, I felt grounded. As Sara Ahmed reminds us, the bodily feeling of disorientation can be unsettling, however, "The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action" (Ahmed, 2006: 157). That *something* my hand reached out to, at that precise moment, was the group I was with: A group of activists that knew about the borders, their capabilities, and divisive powers. This acknowledgement is vital since a claim to a "border-less" queer activism would be at best naïve and at worst assimilative. Radical queer activism, just like "feminism without borders" (Mohanty, 2003), must seek a radical transformation of the many borders that separate struggles, establish networks, and organise around futurity. Then, the melodies of the chants kept on captivating bodies, voicing and reiterating: "Pride is a protest!"

This article explores the ways in which queer Kurds from Turkey[8] who live in London develop creative ways of resistance vis-à-vis their own communities and wider politics in the United Kingdom. It has two lines of inquiry that follow one another, the first of which is a queer critique of Kurdish diaspora studies. Although it is built upon a highly charged political ground—like Palestinian, Tamil, Sikh and Kashmiri diaspora studies—I argue that focusing solely on ethnicity and ethnic/religious organisations contributes to cementing heteronormativity and thus contributing to the oppression of queer subjects. Furthermore, it renders invisible the forms of resistance and transformative epistemologies of Kurdish queers that hold emancipatory potentials, such as the London Pride *protest*, among many others.

Second, I argue that Kurdish queer narratives and acts reveal what I propose to call a radical queer epistemic network. Through this network, which is organised around futurity, different communities borrow and lend queer resistance resources, such as vocabulary, tactics, chants, insights and bodily movements. This helps us to understand how queer Kurdish struggles are connected to other struggles that exceed a sole focus on ethnicity and allows us to push Gayatri

[7] This exclusion might occur at multiple sites: being excluded from their wider ethno-religious communities; being excluded from the mainstream LGBTI+ movement by failing to conform to "white" and middle-class norms; and from the state, due to their objection to state policies.

[8] I confined the investigation to "Kurds from Turkey" since an inclusion of Kurds from Syria, Iraq, and Iran would require a detailed historical analysis of these groups, which exceeds the scope of this article.

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Gopinath's (2005) critical framework of queer diaspora, in which nationalism and globalisations are critically questioned towards new directions. Kurdish queers contribute to and benefit from the radical queer epistemic network that challenges both the nation-state and Eurocentric LGBTI+ politics while reorienting the latter towards wider justice movements.

Destabilising Methodology: *Where are the Queers?*

Considered the largest stateless people in the world and the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, it is estimated that Kurds constitute about twenty-three per cent of Turkey's population, twenty-three per cent of Iraq's population, and ten per cent of Iran's population (McDowall 1997: 3). In each of these states, Kurds have been subjected to different policies varying from cultural assimilation to massacres, and are regarded as "pseudo-citizens" (Yegen, 2009). The history and struggles of the Kurds, and accordingly, their diasporic activity, continues to attract the interest of academic investigations.[9] Yet these studies fail to focus on queer struggles and assume a heteronormative framework.

Diaspora studies have tended to privilege heterosexual subjects on the basis of its canon and methodological tools, which has been critiqued in various critical investigations (Eng, 1997; Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, 2000; Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan, 2002; Gopinath, 2005; Luibhéid, 2008; Puar, 2008; Wesling, 2008). One of the aims of this article is to denounce the privileged and taken-for-granted status of the heteronormative social order, intervening in Kurdish studies by bringing non-normative Kurdish sexualities and their epistemologies to the fore.

The studies on Kurds/Kurdistan conducted in the United Kingdom find their research respondents either through consultation of national organisations or religious minority organisations. The *Kurdish Community Centre*, and *Halkevi (Mala Gel Kurdish and Turkish Community Centre)* are the most consulted organisations in Kurdish diaspora studies in the United Kingdom. Following Nancy Fraser's critique of identity politics, organising around identity tends to reify "drastically simplified group-identity" that denies the multiplicity of other affiliations (Fraser, 2000: 112).[10] Most of the respondents for this article expressed that they do not feel welcome to or comfortable in the organisations mentioned above due to their gender performance or fear of their sexual orientation being disclosed, since the Kurdish diasporic community is a well-connected community. Therefore, taking these organisations as a starting point for research inevitably leads to methodological heterosexism.[11] This cements the othering of Kurdish queer subjects, a topic on which respondents reflected quite eloquently. Sinan, for example, described his position as a religious minority Alevi within the Kurdish community, and a gay man as being "the other of the other of the other" (SK, Gay – Male, 28, 6 June 2017).

Methods of this research included semi-structured in-depth interviews and an (auto)ethnography, including protest at London Pride 2017. The interviews[12] were conducted with

[9] For an in-depth analysis of the history of Kurdish Studies, see Scalbert-Yücel and Le Ray (2006).

[10] Although the shift didn't have significant implications for queer Kurds yet, it is important to note that the Kurdish movement (PKK), an outlawed organisation with a solid base of supporters in Turkey and Syria (and affiliated ethnic organisations in diaspora), has long been challenging the limitations of group-identity by shifting their revolutionary agenda from establishing an independent Kurdistan to a radical understanding of politics under the proposition of Democratic Confederalism. See Jongerden (2017).

[11] This is by no means to assert that these organisations are inherently homophobic, since one of the respondents of this study was an active contributor to the activities of the Kurdish Community Centre with her open lesbian identity. Also, some of the other respondents regularly attend the events organised by these organisations, such as Newroz celebrations. The organisation's importance also lies in its ability to challenge the so-called legitimate diplomacy carried out by Turkey against Kurdish dissent.

[12] For the anonymity of the respondents, the initials have been changed.

nine Kurdish queer people from Turkey who live in London. Five of the respondents accepted voice recording: one self-identified gay man, one self-identified bisexual woman, and three self-identified lesbian women, all of them cisgender. Four of them requested interviews without voice recording. These included two self-identified gay men, one self-identified bisexual woman, and one self-identified non-binary person. Although they all mentioned sexual oppression in their "homeland", all respondents have had to leave Turkey because of political reasons concerning Kurdishness. This also shows how sexual and political oppressions are intertwined. Instead of claiming to represent some of the painful stories that respondents shared about the political violence against the Kurds in Turkey, this study focuses on current lived experiences and respondents' projections about the future.

Bringing non-normative sexualities into the discourse of academic disciplines is a way of opening up novel political, analytical, and transformative possibilities, in addition to being a contribution to a critique of the heteronormative social and political order. Sociology, through its tools, "has been based on and built up within the male social universe" (Smith, 2004: 22). In addition to the male social universe, the dominant heterosexual presumption should be emphasised as much, due to the taken-for-granted "naturalness of a male-dominated, normatively heterosexual social order" (Seidman, 1994). Furthermore, Michael Warner (1991: 8) points out heterosexual culture's canny skill in presenting itself as "society" and hence warns social theory to acknowledge the gay movement more frequently. Following Cynthia Enloe's notable question that laid the foundations of feminist IR scholarship, *"Where are the women?",* scholars should similarly ask, *"Where are the queers?"*[13] in their fields to make visible the silencing of queer epistemologies and analyse how power operates through heteronormative settings.

The gender dimension already finds itself a relatively small space in Kurdish studies, and when it comes to LGBTI+ or queer approaches, there is a dramatic gap. There are several studies on diaspora Kurds who live in the United Kingdom (Wahlbeck, 1999; Griffiths, 2002; Tas, 2014; Baser, 2011; Demir, 2012, 2017; Sirkeci et al., 2016; Eliassi, 2016; Kavak, 2017), but very few of them include a gender lens (Mojab and Gorman 2007; Erel 2013), and none of them investigates or includes non-normative sexualities.[14] This article, accordingly, fills this lacuna in Kurdish studies by turning the epistemological spotlight towards diasporic queer subjects and contributes to broadening the political discourse through non-normative Middle Eastern sexualities.

When it comes to methodology, researchers tend to reach their respondents within heteronormative social settings, mostly because of their own gender identity/sexual orientation, or because the theory they employ is based upon a normative understanding of sexuality. In *serious* academic investigations, questions about non-normative sexualities are at best irrelevant, and at worst trivial. This approach simultaneously reproduces *methodological nationalism* (Glick Schiller et al., 2006) and *methodological heterosexism*. Destabilising methodology, therefore, challenges these flaws by offering an alternative lens for understanding questions about politics, nationalism, and sexuality.

[13] Darcy Leigh (2017), for example, asks this questions in an article where she discusses the productive tensions between Feminist and Queer IR scholarships.

[14] Tas (2014) includes two interviews with self-identified gay and lesbian people, which is important in challenging the methodology employed in Kurdish studies, but understandably neither his analysis nor the literature he consults go beyond repeating victimisation stereotypes.

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Queer Kurdish Futurity

What constitutes Kurdishness in diaspora is fairly complicated[15], as Griffiths (2002) shows, the ethnic awareness or self-knowing of being Kurdish has gradually increased since the early 1980s among Kurdish communities who live in London.[16] The Kurdish Housing Association's 2004 survey, on the other hand, estimates the size of the Kurdish population in London to be at least 50-60,000 (GLA, 2009; Sirkeci et al., 2016:15). Throughout this article, I regard Kurdishness "in relational, processual, dynamic, eventful and disaggregated terms" (Brubaker, 2002: 167).

The Kurdish diaspora can be defined as an ethnonational diaspora (Kavak, 2017: 28), which is conceptualised as "a social-political formation, created as a result of either voluntary or forced migration, whose members regard themselves as of the same ethnonational origin and who permanently reside as minorities in one or several host countries" (Sheffer, 2009: 9-10). The definition asserts that they continue having ties with people back in their home countries (Sheffer, 2009). This conceptualisation enables the diasporic subjects and their connections to the "homeland" to remain in a dialogic relation, which mutually transform and translate ideas, acts, and discourses. I argue that radical activism—radical in the sense that the claims and imaginations transcend state boundaries—employs this tie between homeland and hostland, past and future, in utilising and establishing a radical queer epistemic network.

Brian Keith Axel's seminal article, in which he investigates the Sikh diaspora, proposes considering "the diaspora as something that creates the homeland" (2002: 425, 426), rather than homeland creating the diaspora. Jasbir K. Puar takes Axel's work one step further by emphasising how queer diasporic theorisation expands the diasporic connectivity towards something "beyond or different from sharing a common ancestral homeland" (2008: 51). This shift, highlighted by Puar, allows us to see different modalities of affiliation around futurity.

Axel and Puar's contributions to the understanding of the notion of diaspora are critical in the Kurdish case. The Sikh diaspora, while imagining Khalistan "as a utopian destination for Khalistani activism" (Axel, 2002: 426), experiences temporality around futurity, instead of experiencing it solely on a common past or origin (Puar, 2007: 51). Similarly, the Kurdish diasporic community experiences temporality not only through a common past or origin but also through the imagination(s) of Kurdistan(s). This designates a queer domain, as José Esteban Muñoz stresses: "We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Munoz, 2009: 1). Kurds organise themselves around futurity; I stress that "the Kurdish reality," often quoted in Kurdish political circles, is not an already given, essentialised issue that is exempt from political construction processes, but is constantly reproduced, restructured, reimagined: "Kurdistan's importance lies not in its existence as a geographical region, nor even as a geopolitical zone, but rather its potential" (O'Shea, 2004: 2). However, the idea of a common background, or tradition, was and still is being constructed through a heteronormative epistemology on discursive and institutional levels, as well as in academic investigations. The tension of the moment between the imagined futures and the imagined pasts establishes a site for the theorisation of the radical queer epistemic network.

[15] For a detailed analysis of identity construction processes among Turks, Kurds, and Turkish Cypriots living in the United Kingdom, see Sirkeci et al., 2016: 21-31.

[16] See also ibid.: 7-20.

A Radical Queer Epistemic Network

In this article's case, I underscore that queer Kurds' use of space and time is not external to the Kurdish diasporic community's structures and institutions, but it offers an addition, a supplement to it. That supplement becomes an excess of the Kurdish diasporic community's relation to space and time, which makes possible unexpected alliances with which Kurdish diasporic queers share that excess space and time, like other black and minority ethnic (BAME) queer people. The London Pride *protest* is a succinct example of this, as it is a space that is not accessible to Kurdish struggle(s) otherwise, but is where Kurdish queers manifest their alliances with other radical queer activists. They bring Kurdish (national) claims, demands, emotions and their own resistance resources to the site of a queer protest and they borrow resources in return, where they initiate conversations with other activists, forming a radical queer epistemic network. Thereby *queer being* connects with various *other* struggles:

> Obviously, as Turks, Kurds, and Armenians we can turn our face to our country and fight in order to change things, but at the very same time, we can't sever our connection from what other homosexuals are living through on a global scale. We have to be there; they have to be with us for a better state of organisation, for a larger solidarity *(FR, Lesbian woman, 42, 24 March 2018).*

The radical queer epistemic network at the London Pride *protest* also came into being through the placards. These included "Stop Mass Deportations of LGBTQI+ Asylum Seekers", "No Pride in War", "I do not need Barclays For My Pride", "STOP the racist, fascist anti-Muslim Hate Preachers", and "London in Solidarity with Istanbul Pride." Following the march, the activists blocked the road for a while, where three Kurdish queer activists performed a Kurdish dance, *gerilla halayı/govenda gerîla*, which is known as the dance of Kurdish guerrillas in the mountains. These discourses and acts form the radical queer epistemic network, spark conversations and alliances, negotiate and embolden vocabularies, chants, and tactics, and remains open to contestations each, and every time it is formed.

Queer Kurds, identified as a part of an ethnonational diaspora, continue having ties with their "homeland" and thus influence the debates there, and are influenced by the debates of their homeland. Those who live in London, whether *out* or not, influence their families and closer networks in relation to their ethnic, political, and sexual identities. One respondent, accordingly, said: "I'm not out to my family, but they see I share pro-LGBT posts, they think it is because I'm a socialist and they got used to the idea" (SK, Gay –Male, 28, June 2017). Also, another respondent (JB, Gay –Male, 24, February 2018) came out in the United Kingdom, and his friends from Turkey introduced him to another LGBTI+ person who lived in the United Kingdom and was from the same community. This reflects Sheffer's (2009) assertion as to how "homeland" and "hostland" remain in a dialogic relation, and therefore is affected by the radical queer epistemic network.

It is also significant to explore the experiences of other BAME queer people. Considering Britain's "progressive" attitude towards queer rights, queer people of colour might, *de jure*, have the "right" to navigate spaces with their queer identity/gender presentation; *de facto*, many of them do not or cannot. By coming together, either by protesting the London Pride or organising a separate Pride for BAME people like the UK Black Pride[17], or building short/long-term coalitions, groups or individuals involved in the radical queer epistemic network observe how different communities

[17] For an inspiring account of Paris Black Pride 2016, see Crawford (2016).

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deal with heteronormativity in their community structures. This adds to the radical queer epistemic network, where many windows are opened to see each other's struggles. Protest sites, as discussed in this article, are only one of the many moments of possible encounters of radical queers. An interlocutor, a graduate student specialising in human rights in international law who also works as a paralegal focusing on immigration, reflected on her encounters with United Kingdom asylum procedures that totally neglect the complexities of sexual orientation and different geographies of the world (DB, bisexual woman, 28, June 2017). This encounter and involvement in its politics, therefore, is a novel example of drawing on the radical queer epistemic network, since the interlocutor had become familiar with that sort of negligence in the system from her previous activist involvement.

The moments of radical queer encounters expand the space to further solidarities. In communicative processes that feed the radical queer epistemic network, monolithic groupings, such as "Middle Easterners", "blacks", "Asians" and "Kurds", dissolve into fruitful resistance resources through their sheer complexity. As Mohanty reminds us, "solidarity is always an achievement, the result of active struggle to construct the universal on the basis of particulars/differences" (Mohanty, 2003, 7). Queer Kurds bring their particular resistance resources into the conversation, since as one interlocutor said: "I don't believe a non-Kurdish LGBT person will actually understand the complexities of the region." (TB, Bisexual—Male, 26, June 2017). The same is true for other activists from complex backgrounds, where political and sexual oppressions intertwine, which is why the radical queer epistemic network is vital for a complex struggle around futurity.

Conclusion

In this short article, I argued that the methodological tools used in diaspora studies cement heteronormativity and render queer diasporic subjects' creative resistance capacities invisible. In doing so, dismissing queer voices renders queer people invisible, impossible, and unintelligible subjects. The Kurdish diaspora is a significant example of this. I reflected on how radical activists build alliances, and how those alliances form a radical queer epistemic network where acts, vocabularies and political trajectories are shared, negotiated, embodied, and emboldened. This radical queer epistemic network forms the basis of a united but not homogenised radical and decolonial possibility of different groups with projections around futurity.

Consolidating a political identity that is constructed and repeatedly informed solely by ethnic identity produced by institutions like family, religion, and citizenship[18] inevitably privileges heteronormativity, and fosters epistemic violence against queer diasporic subjects. For an adamant resistance and a just future that is informed by what radical queer activists envision *vis-à-vis* rising right-wing authoritarian figures and structures, scholars have a responsibility not to miss transformative political moments.

London Pride 2017 came to an end, and the radical activists *disseminated* after the parade. Some of us went for drinks with our new acquaintances. While we contributed to the radical queer epistemological network, the radical roots of Pride echoed. What was left was the sheer possibility of queer resistance that continued beyond the protest. We followed each other's struggles, borrowed chants, heard histories and shared what those histories left on us, and came together at other protests.

[18] Or by an understanding of a contract vis-à-vis statelessness. Also see Eliassi (2016).

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