A QUEER EYE FOR THE VEIL: HOMONATIONALISM AND ORIENTALISM

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This essay will first examine the artist's exploration of the subject of the female body, as a single figure, in pairs, or in groups, in the works on view in this exhibition. A careful visual analysis of Les Femmes du Marco # 1 and Les Femmes du Marco # 2 will provide an overview of the artist's approaches to her subjects. Second, the essay will offer a revised reading of Essaydi's work through the lens of queer theory. This approach offers new insight into the artist's work and in our overall understanding of the Orientalist tradition in European and American Western art and its new reiterations.

Lalla Essaydi's Work

Classifying Lalla Essaydi's studio practice as photography overlooks the complex array of production and practice that goes into the pieces such as, performance, textual, participatory, installation, site specific, and relational. She constructs a variety of tableaus with the help of female friends, family, and colleagues and together they create lucid Arabic text, which covers bodies and cloth; the text becomes its own architecture. Her photographs document the assemblage of these artistic practices while bringing an interwoven awareness to the specificity of place, time, language, and body.

Essaydi's photographs operate within a larger historical context of Orientalism and seek to interrogate, diminish, challenge, and dismiss its constructions. Orientalist artists like Eugene Delacroix and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres created intimate paintings that created a mythical Other in reference to Arab and Muslim nations that categorized them as wild, sexual, primitive, and submissive. These notions become most apparent in the wide array of postcards featuring seductive Arabian women before French photographers. These photographs and paintings typically objectified women and placed them in exotic and unreal scenes. Essaydi was spurred to react to these constructions when she learned that Westerners like the curator at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston believed these original Orientalist scenarios were real as Essaydi states:

"Not surprisingly, this interaction had a lasting impact on me. I will never forget that encounter because it drew a line for me. I knew almost instantly that this was my path. So in a way, I thank her. My investigation with Orientalism started when I encountered Orientalist paintings in art history classes... Ironically, it was my exposure to Western art that enabled me to re-enter artistically the spaces of my

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¹ Jones, Amelia. Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts (p. 67). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

childhood and to see them in relation to the constructed space imposed by the Western gaze."²

Though considering her work as an assemblage versus photography one can see it activate and connect to its past, processes, and possibilities. Deleuze and Guattari have elaborated upon the notion of assemblage as a practice with deep political implications, because assemblages are collections of multiplicities:

There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or divide in the subject. There is not even the unity to abort the object, or "return" in the subject. A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature...An assemblage is precisely this increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections. There are no points or positions...There are only lines.³

Essaydi's lines connect women, Orientalism, gender, the Western Gaze, photography, fashion, North Africa, language, sexuality, installation, feminism, etc into a complicated assemblage that is gradually being revealed through her growing series of works. Jasbir Puar furthers the importance of assemblage because it "allows us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities." ⁴ This complicated web speaks to the hegemonic powers of Orientalism and its ongoing metamorphoses, which Essaydi interrogates through her practice.

A Closer Look

Essaydi's Les Femmes du Marco #1 exemplifies the historical play and interrogative approach she takes towards Orientalism. This photography strongly resembles Eugéne Delacroix's Algerian Women in Their Apartment from 1834 with a similar arrangement of female figures within a quasi-tent structure. Yet, Essaydi's figures are not overly voluptuous or sexually evocative because they have neither a bored stare towards the viewer nor a revealing amount of cleavage. Furthermore, Essaydi's figures seems to actually look away from the viewer as in the case of the woman rolled away from the lens and the woman holding back the curtain; Delacroix has his reclining figure and curtain holder looking towards the viewer. Delacroix's setting is very highly engaging and pleasing to the viewer's gaze with exotic and detailed décor, a colorful palette, and infinite pillows. The setting parlays to the notion of harem with its female gatherings. However, Essaydi's figures remain veiled with their hair and ears covered compared to the fully exposed heads of Delacroix. Thus, Essaydi challenges the aesthetics and sexual pleasures that Orientalism attempts to evokes evoke through her set construction, stone cold women, and asexual postures outside of a harem like setting.

² Maureen G. Shanahan,, "A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi," ed. Sarah T. Brooks, *The Photography of Lalla Essaydi. Critiquing and Contextualizing Orientalism* (Broadway, VA: Branner Printing) 2014, 6-22.

³ Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, pg 8

⁴ Jasbir Puar. Terrorist Assemblages. Pg 215

Another of Essaydi's references to Orientalist paintings comes through in *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque* as it references the infamous painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*. Ingres's painting is highly titillating with its full nude figure, sensual fabrics, and bored yet sensual gaze towards the viewer. Essaydi's figure is considerably more modest without any side boob viewers or sensual fabric. Even the exposed flesh is covered by mystic Arabic calligraphy. Interestingly, both figures do retain a turban like piece over their hair. Also, Essaydi's figure has very dirty feet compared to Ingres, as if she was just resting after a day of work and not ready for a playful night in the silk and velvet sheets. This comparison highlights the interrogative approach Essaydi uses in her practice as she appropriates figures, settings, and titles yet inverts the sensual and exotic themes as a challenge towards Orientalists sexual exploitation of exotically construction of the Muslim/Arab female.

Voyeurism

The viewer of Lalla Essaydi's works approaches these subjects from zir⁵ own cultural and lived position and perspective, contingent upon individual circumstances including class, race, sexual orientation, and national status. From my perspective as a white, queer, cisgender⁶ male walking into the Lalla Essaydi exhibition is overwhelming as it presents a variety of reads and interpretations. The initial interpretation—as explained by most labels—explores the issues of Orientalism and the Veil. Yet, my queer eye evokes a read centered on deconstruction. This interpretation arises through a "queer mindset, which "is about decentering dominant belief systems, thinking critically about whose story is being told, from what perspective and for what purpose."8 A gueer mindset allows for an expanded read and contextualization of the work. It also complicates the clean and slick veneers of modernity as it asks the viewer to become actively engaged. The work of queer theorists Jasbir Puar and Judith Butler will serve as points of departure for this revised reading, grounded in the recent theory of Homonationalism and its critique of Orientalism coupled with the performance of gender in the veil. The following will map out historical, personal, and regional experiences, reactions and histories in relationship to Essaydi's work.

Homonationalism & Orientalism

Homonationalism is a term that adds a critical queer perspective to Orientalism. Orientalism looks at the ways that the West dominates the 'Orient' through academia, culture, and colonialism, while, Homonationalism "unlike Orientalism, speaks

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⁵ Zir: gender inclusive pronoun

⁶ Cisgender is a term for people who's gender identity matches their assigned gender at birth. More info: http://commonground.richmond.edu/queer-ur/trans-at-ur/whatstrans.html

⁷ I will be highlighting my own identity and its interpretive experience as the participant and voyeur of the works to further de-centering the omniscient and objective Western gaze that is tied into Orientalism.

⁸ Raven Hillferty. Queerology: A Syllabus. I Don't Do Boxes: Queer Stories from the South. Elsewhere Museum. 2013

particularly to the way gender and sexual rights discourses become central to contemporary forms of Western hegemony." Homonationalism was a term coined in 2007 by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages*. Puar highlights how our post 9/11 world has developed a sexual exceptionalism that has been propagated by feminist constructions of "third world" women that has western genders and sexualities as modern and "castigates the Other as homophobic and perverse, construct the imperialist center as 'tolerant' but sexually, racially, and gendered normal." Many activists, artists and scholars explore the complexities of intersectionality in globalization and queer identities through Puar's informative framework, which has taken its own life outside of the academic tenure tracked time line and process. 11

This perspective can taint a context where the gender identities, sexual orientations, and gender expressions are social constructed within a different culture and society, which conversely is understood through Orientalism. Acknowledging the affects of Homonationalism is important when addressing work dealing with gender, sexuality, and Orientalism. The perception of the Oriental body as restricted, sexually primitive, and dangerous not only perpetuates Orientalism but also overshadows the state's and viewer's own cultural mistreatments of the 'Other.' The viewer runs the risk of homogenizing the other without distinguishing between the "Other of the Same—the laundry list of protected classes that's the stuff of human resource offices—and the other of the Other, or the folks who are completely off the pedagogical grid." This perspective is especially relevant in relationship to Essaydi's work because she only features women with undisclosed sexualities.

Queer Perspectives on Essaydi's Work and the Orientalist Tradition

I question my initial read of the figures as cis-women because I wonder what social constructions dictate this gendered read of them: the veil. I wonder how this piece of clothing became the statement for their identities. Judith Butler's work around sex as a social construction becomes an interpretive tool for understanding this construction. The social construction of sex comes from "not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulation norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms." Therefore, I realized the impact that both the patriarchal social construction and the Orientalist portrayals of the veil have had on the veil's interpretation and the construction of sex/gender identities.

⁹ Natalie Kouri-Tower, Trending Homonationalism, No More Potlucks, 2012: http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/trending-homonationalism/

¹⁰ Jasbir Puar. Queer Times, Queer Assemblages, Social Text 84-5, Vol 23, 2005, Duke Press, Pg 122

¹¹ Naomi Greyser. Academic And Activist Assembleages: An Interview with Jasbir Puar, American Quarterly, Volume 64, Number 4, Dec 2012, 841-843.

¹² C.J. Stapel. Dismantling Metrocentic and Metronormative Curricula. Queer South Rising, Information Age Publishing. Pg 69

¹³ Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter. 1993. 1-27

¹⁴ Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter. 1993. 1-2

The Western construction of gender and the veil have forcibly regulated into a symbol of identity. Conversely, this symbol is now being challenged by notions of homonationalism, which seek to liberate primitive gender constructions.

Going back to the subjects of the figures, I queerly began to wonder about their gender identities and sexualities. This thought might appear as titillating Orientalist erotic voyeurism but instead draws from queer experiences that push one to question the interpretations, symbols, and constructions before you. Essaydi understands the power of these female spaces and their sexual appeal:

Wherever a woman is, when a man enters that space, he established it as a public. This separation of public and private is testament to the power of women's sexuality. It also helps explain how Arab women become sexualized under a Western gaze. In a Sense, what the West did was to dissolve the boundaries between public and private. 15

The artist—mixer of these symbols—becomes an intrinsic part of this construction as she constructs and documents these scenes with women as opposed to a (orientalist) male behind the lens. She recognizes the power and gender politics of space and architecture. This relationship between artist and subject also influences our understanding and relationship to the work. My reflective reaction began through the initial triggering symbol the Veil has become in the West in a post 9/11 world, which remains anxiously fearful and fixated on the turban and veil as embodiments of terrorism.

While most conversations concerning the Veil center around discussions of women's liberation, I feel compelled to offer a queerer interpretation of the Veil in order to expand its horizons in regards to geo-social politics, gender, and sexual potentials. Puar outlines how the veil has "generated Orientalist fantasies of female submission, emerged as nodal fixation, been established as a standard topic of discussion in women studies curriculum, and become an easy marker of an other." Consequently, it is important to actually visualize this potent symbol because face coverings come in a variety of forms; they come in an assortment of styles like the Hijab, Niqab, Burka, Chador, and Khimar. Even defining the categories of face coverings is debated, as there are variations in styles. They all vary in their mode and quantity of coverings. Consequently, discussions of the veil require an understanding of the actual fashion and its variations, contexts, and styles. Their place is important in relationship to our construction of sex and its gender expression and performance. While it may be construed as clothing just for women, it is used by a variety of sexes for various purposes.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/05/europe_muslim_veils/html/1.stm

¹⁵ Samia Errazzouki, Artist Depictions of Arab Women, Jadaliyya, May 2012 http://lallaessaydi.com/news/PDFS/Interviews/Jadaliyya_Interview.pdf

¹⁶Jasbir Puar. Terrorist Assemblages. 181

¹⁷Muslim Veils, BBC Online,

¹⁸ Darshna Soni, From Hijab to Burqa, Oct 2013: http://www.channel4.com/news/from-hijab-to-burqa-a-guide-to-muslim-headwear

This article of fashion is not just restricted or utilized by religious and conservative women. The veil can easily be used as cover for a variety of gender bending experiments. Essaydi's second home country of Saudi Arabia produces a variety of stories around women and men cross-dressing and experimenting with their gender expressions for a variety of political and personal reasons. Even Westerners like Michael Jackson evoke the veil's gender and privacy symbols as exemplified when Jackson grabbed international attention after he was caught behind a veil during a trip to Bahrain. He claimed to be using it to provide personal privacy within society where he had lost privacy as a result of fame. The queer icon Lady Gaga furthered perpetuated the sexual titillation of the veil through her song *Burqa* (later renamed *Aura*), which led to protests by many Muslim women due to the titillating eroticism of the covered body. These Western uses and appropriations highlight the Orientalist and Homonational constructs around the Veil as they attempt to colonize its construction for their own purpose, while also advocate for its abolition. While the West remains fascinated on the sexual potential of the Veil, there are varying social differences around its use across the Muslim world.

Essaydi places her photographs in the North Africa geographic region of Morocco, whose borders contain a variety of ethnic groups like Arabs, Berbers, Jews, and French.²² There are no specific laws in Morocco requiring women to Veil themselves but there is still strong social pressures.²³ Western North Africa is a region where veiling by both sexes has a long tradition. The Berbers of Morocco are primarily identified as the Imazighen.²⁴ To the south of Morocco, in the Sahara region, another Berber group, the Tuareg exist.²⁵ The Tuareg are known for a flip in the gendered fashion of the face coverings because the men will veil their faces instead of the women.²⁶ They also do not restrict women to private or domestic spaces and allow some forms of economic independencies. Shah Mahmoud Hanifi outlined in the exhibition's catalogue the geopolitical constructions of

¹⁹ Tracy Clark-Flory, Cross-dressing in Saudi Arabia? Salon, May 2008 http://www.salon.com/2008/05/14/saudi love/

²⁰ Hasan Jamali, Michael Jackson Spotted in Robe & Veil, Associated Press, Jan 2006 http://sweetness-light.com/archive/michael-jackson-takes-the-burka#.UvakN2SwL_E ²¹ Umema Aimen, Washington Post, Aug 2013

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/wp/2013/08/19/dear-lady-gaga-burqa-sends-the-wrong-message/

²² Morocco, CIA World Factbook, 2014 https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/theworld-factbook/geos/mo.html

²³ Richard Hamilton, BBC News, Oct 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/5413808.stm

²⁴ Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, Arabs, Berbers, Islam, and Orientalism in Morocco: Historically and Culturally Contextualizing the work of Lalla essaydi, Exhibition Catalogue, 2014

²⁵ Thomas K. Seligman & Kristyne Loughran, Art of the Tuareg: Sahara Nomads in a Modern World, Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, 2007-2008, http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/tuareg/who.html

²⁶ Custom, *Meet the Tuareg*, PBS

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/africa/explore/sahara/sahara_people_customs_lo.html

the Arab-Berber identity. To delve deeper into this identity reveals further complications that require further (de)classifications between the Tuareg and Imazighen who both have North African Berber roots.

Interestingly Essaydi's work has slowly moved away from the veil as featured in the *Converging Territories* series to the more provocatively revealing outfits of the *Bullet* series. The viewer is not left with as many questions about the figures identities. Yet, I would push viewers to challenge their own preconceived notions around the gender presentations of the characters in order to not replicate the generally oppressive and binary gender system.

Morocco is considered a more liberal nation within the greater Arab world, in part because there is a recognized historical tolerance of gay culture. The construction and perception of Morocco as a conservative place—instilled by Arabic/Muslim geopolitics—is pierced by its place in gay tourism and history. It was a destination for many queer figures like Kenneth Williams, William Burroughs, Joe Orton, and Paul Bowles. Morocco actually popped into queer news during the 1960s when French singer Coccinelle went to Casablanca for a sex-change surgery in 1958. The country might still have strict laws like Article 489 of the Penal code, which bans homosexuality however, there are varying degrees of tolerance as cities like Marrakesh—home to Essaydi—are home to numerous gays bars and frequently appear on gay travel guides. These queer spaces are not just limited to Western expatriates but are also utilized by queer Moroccans. The group KifKif is Morocco's largest queer organization. Interestingly, KifKif comes from the Arabic expression for "whatever." As opposed to Western ideals of LGBT equality that are rooted in rights like Marriage, KifKif focuses on more transformational objects:

KifKif has united us against the stigmatization and discrimination we face in our society due to our sexual orientation and gender identity. We try to reconcile our sexual identity with the values of our civilization and the cultural identity of our country.

We work through the group to help and boost self-esteem, inform and create a safe environment allowing the participation and interaction between Moroccan citizens who happen to have a different sexuality.³¹

2002http://queermusicheritage.us/nov2002e.html

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²⁷ Travel Reports: Morocco, Gay Times, http://www.gaytimes.co.uk/HotSpots/Travel-sectionid-1-articleid-25-page-0.html

²⁸ Coccinelle, Queer Music Heritage, Nov

²⁹ Morocco: Overturn Verdicts for Homosexual Conduct, Human Rights Watch, December 2007: http://www.hrw.org/news/2007/12/11/morocco-overturn-verdicts-homosexual-conduct

³⁰ Gay Scene, Merrakesh: Morocco, GayTravel.com: http://www.gaytravel.com/gayguides/marrakesh/gay-scene

³¹ KifKif http://fr.kifkifgroup.org/p/about-us.html

An overview of KifKif's website reveals no mention of same-sex marriage, military participation, adoption, or workplace protections. These are the foundational ideas of liberation to Western LGBT organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force. Yet anxiety, still persists around KifKif and other western gay organizations as they give credence to Islamist's arguments about homosexuality as a foreign influence and they reduce homosexual numbers because "once homosexuality is defined and dragged out of the closet in terms no body wants to have anything to do with it;" conversely, through Homonationalism, Western queers will then point to resulting homophobic backlashes of arrests, beatings, and legislation to get more publicity and funding even as the hysteria rises and consequently pushes many further away from their queer desires and activities. "33"

Essaydi's figures are sexually evocative, especially in her *Harem* series as harems were originally designed for the lustful pleasure of men. She inverts these pleasures through the female communal construction of the photographic space:

Living together for several weeks, they discus and later rehearse for the pictures. To write on their bodies and on the surfaces that surround them...together they create an exclusive real of women, in which even the artist' gaze is female and familiar.³⁴

Essyadi converts this harem space, which are designed as spaces for the sexual pleasure of men, into a female centered and constructed space. This metamorphosis parlays into Essaydi's feminist politics that focus on gradual transformation along the practices of Third Wave feminism: We Do not manifest in the streets. We are not militant in that sense. The change is very quiet. We work in a quieter manner suited to tradition and mores. I think this is the best way to be heard and to really make the change."³⁵

I wonder about the possible interpersonal pleasures available to women in these women 'only' spaces like those of the domestic realm. As a queer, I know that gender segregated space can actually provide cover to queer feelings, actions, and relationships. These gender specific spaces have a history as places for the concealment of same-sex desire, relations, and love. In Victorian times, these same-sex relationships were referred to as Boston Marriages:

³⁵ Maureen Shanahan, "A Conversation with Lalla Essaydi," The Photography of Lalla Essaydi: Critiquing and Contextualizing Orientalism, 2014. JMU. Pg 19

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³² Behind the Veil of Vice: The Business and Culture of Sex in the Middle East. John R. Bradley. Pg 250 Macmillan, 2010.

³³ John R. Bradle. Behind the Veil of Vice: The Business and Culture of Sex in the Middle East. 250

³⁴ David Ehreinpris, Exhibition Catalogue, Pg 60

refer to a relationship between women who set up a household together independent of men...and were typically characterized by affection and intimacy, though the extent to which partners engage in sexual activity is unclear. ³⁶

Coincidently, Essaydi spends/spent time in Boston as she completed an MFA at School of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and continues to print her work in the city's suburbs. The geographic site makes a serendipitous connection to place, which is highly accented in Essaydi's practice, artistic story, and life. These Boston Married women provided a system and relationship for women—hetero and homo—to formulate self-supporting relationships without men. ³⁷ Essaydi speaks to the power of female spaces, bonds, and gatherings:

The process itself, the time I spent with these women, is very important. That is what determines what's in my work: the texture, the gestures. We get together in those spaces and we are a group of women. We talk a lot not necessarily about my work...So we get together and we talk and I write and I respond to them. We spend sometimes days or weeks together.³⁸

I begin to wonder about the arrangements in Essaydi's photos and wonder why I assumed they might be connected romantically and supported men. Furthermore, I begin to further see these installations and performances as a strong feminist statement that draws from Third Wave Feminist ideals.

The resolute faces—when not covered—of Essaydi's figures display not remorse, fear, or disdain but the power, pleasure, and dominance that are especially evocative in the *Bullet* Series. These women use their sexuality and position for power, survival, and personal pleasure. At first, they are appealing but as a commenter notes: "This enticingly exotic subject of Western fantasy may well be a corpse." Their faces are not reminiscent of the fearful or bored faces in the Orientalist figures by those like Courbet but of the powerful composed faces in the work of post-colonial artists like Shirin Neshat. The images' large size only furthers the sense of power these women exude as they overwhelm the orientalist fantasy. A hallmark scene by Orientalists of women was in a harem, which dehumanization them as it equates them to just sources of pleasure. Yet Essaydi's women are powerful yet provocative women who might still titillate but on their own accord, place, and reasons. The use of gun shells in the *Bullet* series conveys this sense of power.

³⁶ Gina Misiroglu, *American Countercultures* Volume 1, 2009, pg 103

³⁷ Ami Angelowicz, A Brief History of Boston Marriages, The Frisky, Sep 2012: http://www.thefrisky.com/2012-09-12/a-brief-history-of-boston-marriages/

³⁸ Catlaogue's Interview with M. G. Shanahan

³⁹ GP. Visions of the Islamic World, The Economist, 2013 http://lallaessaydi.com/news/PDFS/Reviews/The_Economist_Visions_of_the_Islamic_w orld.pdf

With all of these thoughts racing through my head—orientalism, sexuality, voyeurism, Homonationalism, geography, gender identities—I am left wondering "for what purposes" does Essaydi construct her work. I follow the advice from Essaydi in that "the viewer completes them and that's part of the dialogue." He is tackling Orientalism through deconstruction and subversion but she is not totally deconstructing it or abolishing it. Instead, she seems to interrogate Orientalism through seemingly playful and austere forms. The viewer is left with a hollow Orientalist construction; yet, the work also confuses and probes other hegemonic systems like heterosexuality and patriarchy. The work reveals the social construction of these systems and like her calligraphy blurs them so that we realize they are readable yet also social gibberish in an ongoing struggle for life. We realize that gender and sexuality become an implicate part of Orientalism when coupled with the notion of Homonationalism. Companionship and personal veracity become the languages within Essaydi's spaces with their motives remaining unspoken because maybe we just do not need to know.

⁴⁰ Natalie Kouri-Towe, Homonatioalism, No More Potlucks, http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/trending-homonationalism/, 2012

⁴¹ Ming Lin, Writing Women: Interview with Lalla Essaydi, Mar 2013: http://lallaessaydi.com/news/PDFS/Interviews/ArtAsiaPacific.pdf

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