Ladies and Gentlemen, Boyahs and Girls

Uploading Transnational Queer Subjectivities in the United Arab Emirates

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In recent years the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has witnessed multiple transgressive discourses pertaining to heteronormative structures of sexuality, with cyberenvironment serving as a primary platform for the enactments of subaltern sexual subjectivities. In this chapter, I explore how state apparatuses and technologies of control both shape and govern the expression of queer subjectivities in cyberspace. As a result of intense economic restructuring, regional integration, and technological growth, the UAE has garnered increasing global prominence as a pioneering model for post-oil development over the past decade. Despite steps toward unification of the seven original “Trucial States” over the past forty years, the UAE presents a challenge to notions of a unified national hegemony, which bears directly on the ways in which queer subjectivities are regulated by technologies of control enforced not only by the federal government but also by local police, families, and religious clerics.

It is important to note that there is a distinction between the governance of queer subjectivities in the realm of cyberspace and in “real” space, the latter being subject to a greater multiplicity of social power. In an illustration of this regulatory move, the Ministry of Social Affairs recently launched an “Awareness Initiative” targeting young women within educational institutions and youth detention centers identified as mustarjilat, or young women who “[gave] up the characteristics of femininity, [try] to imitate boys in clothing and mannerisms, and [are] attracted to females only.” The role of regulating queer subjectivities is also adopted by nonbureaucratic entities; female students at the multipurpose Higher Colleges of Technology, for example, are required to sign a ta‘ābd (agreement) that they will “behave” in their sexual conduct, and students at the all-female Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, similarly, have long been surveilled for public displays of affection. Given the extensive regulation of both gender and sexuality in real space, it is not surprising that UAE Internet users have the second-highest rate of membership in social networking sites in the world. The extension of queer subjectivities into online discursive communities within the region of the Arab Gulf states is also undoubtedly linked to the UAE’s concerted investment in the development of information technologies. Because of its greater interest in joining the global community compared to its neighboring states, the UAE presents a particularly interesting context within which to examine the relationship between the national development of telecommunications and the emergence of new mediated forms of queer subjectivities.

Recent scholarship has critically engaged with the argument that online discourse is inextricably linked to offline worlds. Moreover, it has been argued that online communities are offered a certain transgressive agency that would otherwise be denied in “real” space. However, there has been a relative paucity of area-focused scholarship on specifically queer phenomena and telecommunications in the region of the Arab Gulf. I take the position that on- and offline worlds are coconstituted rather than distinct and separate. The relatively lower visibility and heightened policing of queerness in offline spaces impacts and is impacted by the heightened visibility and relatively less prevalent policing of queerness online. Using a textual and ethnographic analytical framework, I extend the argument of transnational sexual democratic space into the context of the UAE. First, I engage with the dissemination of queer subjectivities in the public sphere, demonstrating how this phenomenon is simultaneously accommodated and denied in current Emirati sociopolitical discourse. I then examine the expression of queerness in cyberspace and interrogate the extent to which a pan-Gulfian transnational queer imaginary is being produced in the context of new social networking technologies such as Facebook. As part of this discussion, culturally specific understandings of embodied practices will be juxtaposed with discourses of cultural protectionism and authenticity as voiced by religious clerics online. Drawing on firsthand interviews with representatives of Etisalat, a large national telecommunications company, and the governing body Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA), I argue that the state is currently attempting to restructure its image and media presence according to paradigmatic notions of Islamic autocracy by denying free speech and regulating the viability of sexuality in cyberspace.

I use the notion of the transnational in the context of the “disrupted” surveillance of cyberspace, as opposed to the surveillance of national space on the ground, which is concerned solely with national citizens. This process, however, is also situated against a backdrop of the Emirates’ transnationalist turn insofar as national investments in cultural heterogeneity are posited against an increasing concern over the issue of Emirati national identity. For example, Dubai, in its rigorous embrace of the Western metropolis as the dominant referential point and model of modernity, has made a concerted effort to invest in the importation of “new” migrant communities. In addition, the anxiety over national identity operates with respect to a demographic imbalance: the position of the Emirati population is threatened not only by the UAE’s efforts to implement Western
models of multiculturalism but also by the fact that noncitizens constitute 79.9 percent of the population.‘’ I argue that this emergent transnationalist ethos has engendered a rupture in the sociopolitical field, with Emirati national identity rendered the vessel of collective national anxiety.

This chapter focuses on what I delineate as the “post-oil” generation: those who are directly subjected to a national collective imaginary regarding the state’s troubled identity—its simultaneous strivings toward Western models of progress and its attempts to construct and preserve an authentic Arab Islamic identity. Not only is this generation distinctive in that they are the first to be born after the establishment of the Emirates as a country in 1971; they have borne witness to a landscape of excess, expatriate-national demographic imbalance, and values that appear in contradistinction to those upheld by indigenous groups, all of which are directly tied to the first oil boom in this region from 1973 to 1982. Although the national population as a whole carries the burden of embodying the essence of an Emirati identity under threat, with Emiratis outnumbered by expatriates by more than eight to one and with 51.4 percent of the Emirati population under age nineteen,‘’ it is arguably the youth who are especially vested with the responsibility of defending against the erosion of ‘authentic’ Emirati national cultural identity. Although this responsibility comes with both power and subjugation, the sociopolitical field is ambivalent as far as the articulation of power is concerned: those who are in receipt of the state’s privileges are simultaneously subordinated—subject to discourses of cultural preservation that dictate the extent of acceptable transgression. Within this terrain, the post-oil generation is producing multiple discourses that challenge the very identity which they have been tasked to uphold.

The Dissemination of Queer Subjectivities

In recent years, the proliferation of queer subjectivities in the UAE has been detected in greater magnitude, instigating a national moral panic. Contemporary manifestations of queer subjectivities, such as cross-dressing, have become increasingly visible in the public realm. Among men, sartorial queer culture is evident in the wearing of fitted ‘kandora’ long, white, male-body clothing that is stitched tightly at the waist, taking the form of a tight-fitting dress. Among national women—although they were once relegated to expressing queerness primarily in the semipublic realm (universities, "family spaces"), given the limitations inherent in the social necessity of wearing the ‘abaya’ (Islamic national dress/body veil)—queer expression has been increasingly detected in the public sphere (e.g., butch self-stylizations in shopping malls).

In tandem with the increased visibility of queer culture in the form of dress, condemnatory proclamations made by conservatives are drawing contemporary queer culture into the discursive realm. In an unstructured interview I conducted at the women’s campus of Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, a group of students described the popularity of the American series The L Word, which portrays the lives of a group of lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. Contrary to conservative readings of queer politics as solely a product of the Western world, the students explained how screen representations of homosexuality are in fact being articulated regionally. As an example, the women cited the Kuwaiti television series Adeel Al Rouh (2005), which portrayed a lesbian character who, although socially marginalized, was nonetheless represented in her homosexuality.‘’ It could be argued that although the portrayal was one of condemnation, the visibility provided by the Kuwait television series contributes by drawing queer politics into the discursive realm, with homosexuality no longer subalternized or, at least, not considered wholly taboo.

The launch of a “Social Values” campaign in 2008 in the UAE stands as another example of the ways in which queer politics is allowed to enter sociopolitical discourse—here, through its articulation by the conservative bloc itself. Released in collaboration with the Dubai Police and several governmental and private organizations, the campaign targets, arrests, and puts on trial youth who are seen to imitate the opposite gender, aiming to “protect society from any social deviancy.”‘’ The chief of Dubai Police, Brigadier Khalifan, has placed particular emphasis on the corrupting role of satellite channels, which broadcast “deviant behavior” throughout the region of the Gulf States, stating to the Al-Bayan newspaper that “young people believe what they see in the media and apply it to their lives without considering the content of the message they are getting.”‘’ It is perhaps an unintended consequence of the policing of sexuality that queer culture becomes more visible. What is particularly striking is that the brigadier describes how the national youth’s expression of subjectivity lies at the intersection of globalization and cultural displacement, with the media functioning as the vehicle for contamination:

The discovery of oil . . . has resulted in a change in society’s habits. . . . Our surveys conducted on mostly youth show that some of the most profound foreign additions to our lifestyles have been in attire, strange hairstyles, use of foreign words in our everyday speech, not to mention imitating celebrities. The source of the most influence has been the satellite channel and the Internet, from which imitators have received material that is alien to Emirati society.‘’

With the national youth here upheld as the social group most vulnerable to the displacement of gender norms, such narratives of cultural protectionism seek
to combat globalizing “alien” forces that contaminate constructions of cultural authenticity, such as spoken local dialect and national dress, among others. The media is seen to serve as a vehicle, producing and influencing the dissemination of queer subjectivities.

Gender Governance and the Resignification of Female Space

In the region of the Arab Gulf, the governance of gender and the regulation of private and public space have been historically interdependent. In the UAE, the regulation of space operates in tandem with a nuanced sociopolitical arrangement of hegemonic power. Socially, public and private spaces are regulated through parental surveillance, and female dress and conduct through Islamic modesty codes. These forms of power are not as strictly and categorically defined in terms of society versus the law. Those executions of power that might fall under the purview of familial structures (e.g., youth dressing in drag) are in fact regulated by the police; conversely, socioeconomic structures often regulate that which might be thought of as the provenance of government (e.g., gender-based conduct in public spaces). A common trend is families arranging marriages for their lesbian daughters, either in the hope that they will “change” or to protect family honor.7 Despite the power of the family to implement such marital law, however, it is not uncommon for homosexual men and women to marry another willingly, enabling them to conduct independent homosexual lives within the constraints of heteronormative subordination.

Recent models of governmentality have reinscribed what constitutes gendered space within the context of the public and the private. Unlike Saudi Arabia, for example, the UAE is not subject to strict notions of gendered segregation within the public sphere, and interaction in both work and social spheres is common. Among upper- and middle-class female society, however, gendered segregation exists and, as noted earlier, is largely implemented within the context of societal norms as opposed to judicial power. Weddings and formal social events continue to be segregated, and “ladies’ clubs” or “women’s clubs” are widespread and popular. However, the recent surveillance, such as that on college campuses, has reinscribed the meaning of private, female space. Both the public expression of homosexuality and queer subjectivities through drag have proliferated within female spaces, since until recently these spaces have not been subject to parental surveillance or regulation by the state. It is widely believed that such spaces have enabled the dissemination of queer subjectivities among young Emirati women, and in response, various methods of social control have been employed. These include the introduction of female police and security guards into women’s clubs, the implementation of dress-code regulations in women’s colleges, and—as a

result of observations of lesbianism in Al-Mamzar Park in Dubai and a skating rink in Abu Dhabi—the transformation of “women’s day” into “family day.” Due to such modes of governmentality, female spaces have been resignified, no longer considered private.

This resignification serves to shed light on the way in which female space is once again problematized as a categorical entity within a gendered hierarchical framework. In this regional context, traditional modes of gender segregation have allocated space by privileging the male through alignment with the public and subordinating the female through alignment with the private. Such structures of gender hierarchy have been established to the exclusion of homosexual narratives; however, their recent eruption has come to be accommodated solely within female, private spaces, rather than within male public space. That “women’s day” is relabeled “family day” heralds the displacement of a gender norm, further complicating the subordination of female space, while male space remains unproblematized. Indeed, male homosexual narratives have been denied entry into this categorical framework altogether, excluded from the resignification of gendered space.

Technodialects and the Production of a Pan-Gulfian Queer Imaginary

As noted earlier, the dissemination of queer subjectivities is largely seen as being related to the influence of the media. Whereas the statement issued by the chief of Dubai’s police (as well as by other federal government bodies) implicates the media at large for its influence on queer communities, it is cybercultures alone that provide a platform for the actual dissemination of queer narratives. Unlike satellite television, whose influence is unidirectional, the Internet facilitates the creation of dialogic online communities. It has been established that Internet communication technology de-emphasizes the gender-race-class triad, empowering the user and thus serving to democratize societies. Furthermore, platforms within cyberculture such as blogging arguably function as a tool of resistance against autocratic governments and state censorship.

Although I do not purport to celebrate cyberculture as the sole site of resistant narratives, nor do I uphold online sociality as a domain uncommodified by off-line reality, Internet usage by the post-oil generation has nonetheless served as a political vehicle for queer subjectivities. The phenomenon of the “boynah” identity in the Arab Gulf states exemplifies the extent to which cyberculture has facilitated the dissemination of such identities by female youth and produced resistant narratives with regard to patriarchal structures of heteronormativity and the sociolegal governance of gendered space. Boyah is a lexicalization
of the English boy, followed by the Arabic feminine suffix -ah, and it is employed within local popular discourse to refer to the self-stylizations of butch identities. Boyah identity is an outgrowth of an increasingly visible subculture within the Arab Gulf states. The articulation of boyahs in cyberspace, primarily through social networking websites such as Facebook, Flickr, and MySpace, has created a transnational pan-Gulfian community, with the Internet serving as a mediator for the production of a queer imaginary. Boyahs are popular on Facebook; entering the search term “boyah” yields scores of groups, including “The L Gurlz” and “BanoQoza & Boyar [Girls and Boyahs].”

The formation of Gulfian online queer communities is facilitated by “The Wall” on Facebook, where members from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE discuss various themes such as fidelity, love, the proliferation of new boyah groups, lesbianism, and homosexuality at large. Members often use the forum to pose questions about relationships and boyah identities, such as the following from one user in a recent posting: “i wanna know 1 thing i’ve met alott of boyaz in my life & none of them wanted to have a real relationship y does all boyar r like that ?? is it in there blood or what ??!” Responses from other members are then posted, one example of which also demonstrates pan-Gulfian “technodialect,” the lexicalization of Arabic and English, and numeric substitution common on such sites: “its not that its a boyah to do this bilsaka fe boyaz maRah [oh the contrary, there are boyahs that are extremely] loyal n all bs [but] its allL about love n jelousy !!! thx yalgrou [for the group] n hope to c more posts :D.” Social networking groups such as these provide a platform for the formation of queer communities that, although visible to some degree off-line, would be deemed transgressive. Transcending online alliances and national boundaries, boyah identities inhabit what Benedict Anderson terms “imagined communities,” with boyahs signifying a shared system of cultural representation within the region of the Arab Gulf. This system is intensified by the use of a common cyber dialect, with members using names such as “Boyah Q8 [Kuwait]” and “Jeddah Alromaiboyas.”

That the dissemination of queer subjectivities has served to influence and alter notions of privacy underscores the necessity of cyberspace as a platform for transgressive expression. Users of such spaces challenge the state through their noncompliance with the judicial system and thereby at least partially transcend the public/private dichotomy found in “real” space. Moreover, the availability of anonymous identities and the vocabularies and tactics employed to suggest queerness, while still maintaining the status quo, further facilitate the articulation of queer politics online. Some examples of usernames that suggest female queerness through both content and the appearance of the Arabic feminine suffix -ah are “SportyQah” (“Sporty One”), “Boyahs,” “Rayalahs” (“Man”), and “BanooTah” (“Girlie One”); other names reflect a change from a real (female) name into a man’s name (e.g., Hamdah becomes “Hamad,” Mariam becomes “Muhammed”). Another popular means of conveying queerness online is the use of suggestive profile pictures, such as a caricature of a boyah from the state of Oman by the user “Kyoot [Cute] London Boyah” (see figure 16.1) and a picture of the popular lesbian character Shane from the television show The L Word by the Saudi-Arabian user “Dode Boya” (see figure 16.2).

Queer Gulfian communities are expressed and formed not only online but in the real world. Among the Facebook groups recently established is one entitled “boyar w curat in london (summer)” (boyahs and cute ones in London [summer]), which was uploaded to create a social network in London over the summer of 2008. Since the first oil boom in the Arab Gulf, London has for decades served as a place in which many Gulf Arabs spend their summer holidays. There is in fact a distinct Arab cosmopolitan presence in London, to the extent that “Arab Season” has recently been coined by the retail industry to refer to the summer months, when Gulf Arabs focus on spending their holidays. The formation of the London boyah group on Facebook thus not only points to the manifestation of a pan-Gulfian transnational discursive community but further demonstrates the material realization of such communities in (real) spaces that are not subject to the principles of the governance of sexuality found in the Arab Gulf states. Indeed, usage of the Internet and of social networking profiles such as Facebook illustrates the manne: in which the transnational space afforded by cybertechnologies challenges and displaces the governance of sexuality within the public sphere, producing expressions of queerness both on- and off-line. This process reflects what Nick Couldry describes as the “broader landscape” of how media is resurrected and lived in everyday life, contributing to social life and politics both beyond and within the “centralizing pressures of the nation state.”
The case of the London Facebook group demonstrates the intersection of media and everyday life insofar as the expression of queerness is concerned: the transcending of the governance of sexuality offered by cybertechnologies is not only realized and made intelligible but moreover allows for the production of an imaginary that unsettles notions of sovereignty, territoriality, and local structures of domination. What is important here is not so much that cybertechnology displaces the governance of sexuality in mediating a transnational queer imaginary but, rather, the way in which the media and the everyday intersect to produce that imaginary.

"Exposure," Politics, and Protectionism

In a Facebook group entitled "WHY AL Boyat Like These????," which references Saudi Arabia as its host location, the overarching theme of discussion is "authenticity," with Islamic moralism rendered a central premise of attack by conservative members. The Facebook group displays several videos whose subject is the condemnation of the boyah identity and its dissemination within the region. One video's montage begins with a series of photographs that depict the boyah stylizations. The text states,

The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, cursed female-im impersonators who are males, and the male impersonators who are women. There's a phenomenon growing among us of male impersonators, or what they call "boyah"—even children know about them. It is a disgusting phenomenon, but some call it a "trend." . . . Dear male impersonator, are you comfortable with yourself? Do you feel happy when you change the nature which God created? . . . Is it your intention to imitate the West? . . . I just want to make one thing clear before I continue. These pictures were displayed on Flickr by boyah. Which means I am not the one who is exposing them; they expose themselves. . . . I curse the West, which has promoted this corruption and have sent us their filth. And some of you emulate them as if they are role models. Let's see what the West has given us. [Pictures from The L Word then appear, followed by pictures of anti-Islamic sentiment, including people urinating and stepping on the Quran and illustrations of Danish cartoon caricatures of the prophet Muhammad] 24

This excerpt demonstrates the extent to which queerness is seen as part of a Western global ethos—an imposition and a threat to an Islamic cultural identity, as well as a byproduct of anti-Islamic sentiment. This stance is reminiscent of the scholarly assertion that queerness within non-Western regional contexts is seen as a product of Westernization and as an influence emanating from the West. 25 That which is construed as external and deviant is rendered a Western product, namely, through the alignment of condemnatory rhetoric with images from The L Word. The overarching stance of the statement is positioned with regard to a discursive structure of binary opposites: deviant sexual identities are placed alongside the Danish cartoons and images of the Quran being obliterated (see figure 6.3). Finally, the statement that the images were found on Flickr (uploaded by boyahs themselves) underlines the extent to which cybertechnology is seen as a vehicle and platform of visibility and resistance. By highlighting the idea that the boyahs have "exposed themselves," the video attempts to circumscribe them within a complex of honor and shame. It is through the very act of uploading, however, that agency is achieved, transcending sociocultural norms and operating against culturally specific understandings of identity and embodiment.

In another video posted on the same Facebook group, the religious cleric Muhammed Al-Awadhi condemns the dissemination of the boyah identity, citing the notion of the body in Islam, most especially in relation to drag. Addressing boyahs and the culture of cross-dressing in general, he states, "Your body is not of your own possession, it belongs to God. . . . So when we say that tattoos are forbidden [in Islam] or, for example, piercing the body or shaving half your head and hence changing your appearance, . . . it is forbidden because your body is God's possession." Therefore, Al-Awadhi concludes, any form of inscription or alteration in the name of articulating an embodied identity—be it gendered, sexual, or otherwise—is condemned.
It is particularly interesting to cross-examine this argument in relation to post-modern readings of the body as a discursive and epistemological entity. Relevant here are Foucauldian techniques of understanding how apparatuses of control mark the transition between traditional order and what Foucault terms "scientific biopower." Insofar as the queer body in Islam is concerned, it could be argued that its alterity stands as a threat, in need of containment. As already established, its entry into the sociopolitical discursive realm in the UAE demonstrates that queerness both is constituted within the dominant discourses of governance and, in its excess, stands as a site of potential transgression against the very boundaries that seek to contain it. In the UAE, the exercise of "scientific biopower" on the queer body is exemplified in the state's concerted effort to eliminate the expression of queerness from within the public sphere. Political prerogatives in this instance would include regulating not only the queer body itself but also the space the queer body occupies. What, then, of the online queer body, which does not corporeally exist?

Relevant here is a discussion of cyborgian identities, hybrids of the discursive and the material that represent a postgendered identity beyond domination. In their ability to transgress boundaries and resist domination, cyborgian identities can effect progressive political action, thereby disrupting the terms of governmentality of queer space and Islamic notions of embodiment. The politicization of the cyborg is of significance to Web-based expression of boyahs and the Islamic condemnation of bodily reinscription. Since the resignification of the body is an anti-Islamic act, cyborgian constructions of queerness resist similar condemnation since the body is not wholly present.

In cyborg identities' indeterminate status, 'neither wholly technological nor completely organic,' Anne Balsamo writes that they evade not only dominant cultural frameworks but also the notion of the natural body standing in opposition to the technological body. In the case of the boyah, and in that of queer subjectivities generally, transgression is more comfortably accommodated through online cyborg identities than through material manifestations of queerness in the Emirati public sphere. With the boundary between body and machine altered, Islamic readings of bodily materiality are to a large extent displaced, as (cyborgian) bodily reinscription, and hence resignification, is made available. With the complex of honor and shame rendered central to culturally specific notions of gendered and sexual subjectivities, the mechanical apparatus allows for both the "exposure" of queerness and anonymity of identity in a way that would not be possible without hybridization. In other words, the mechanical apparatus limits the potential for shame, since unlike acts of transgression that can be identified, cyborgian identities provide anonymity through aliases that appear in various forums and chat rooms. The act of uploading one's queer subjectivity therefore becomes transgressive of the dominant culture order, with the question of transgression specifically located in the interdeterminacy of the hybrid design.

What is perhaps most significant about the conservative rhetoric seen in media such as the Facebook videos is that alternative sexualities are heralded as by-products of Western cultural imperialism. Although the penal code in the UAE does not state that homosexuality is prohibited, public opinion is demanding it. The penal code does, however, prohibit men from dressing as women; despite this prohibition, manifestations of queer cultures, such as the popular ma.s.d drag band Mal'ayah, have existed in the Emirates for many years. More contemporary manifestations of queer culture, however, are seen as alien—equated directly with the West and not necessarily seen as a product of globalization. This is manifest in a video posted on Facebook entitled "WHY AL Boyah Like These???," in which the Kuwaiti cleric Nabeel Al-Awadhi argues, "The coinage of 'boyah' in itself is problematic because it is not ours—it imitates the English word 'boy' and combines it with an Arabic feminine suffix... This is an example of how this sexual phenomenon is a direct imitation of the West." What could be said of the boyah identity is that it is not merely an imitation of the West achieved through globalizing forces but a reappropriation of it—an integration of a Western linguistic term with an Arabic suffix that results in a coconstituent not only of sexual subjectivities but also of cultural logics. Their disjuncture from the local ought to be read within the context of the region's enthusiastic embrace of globalization and the Emirates' presentation of itself as a nation belonging to the global community.

New Censures: Local Apprehensions and Global Realities

In recent years, international exposure of autocratic oppression has engendered a sense of urgency on the part of the Emirati government to revamp its self-image. With the establishment of the Telecommunications Regulative Authority (TRA) in 2004 and its aim to provide transparency with regard to censorship, the government has increasingly endorsed what is seen as a more progressive attitude toward freedom of speech. The government's position is in part a response and in part a byproduct of continuing human rights discourses in the world press about recurring democratic violations—the use of children as camel jockeys, poor living conditions for migrant workers, and the imprisonment of homosexuals—as well as control of the media by local governments.

As part of the government's preoccupation with its self-image, the National Media Council (NMC) was established to train journalists and diplomats. A representative of the NMC explained to me that there has been a desire to limit the negative publicity of Dubai because of its tourist industry, since any hint of
attack for human rights violations could be seen as a threat to that industry and as something to be controlled.\textsuperscript{10} Dubai thus stands as an example of the uncomfortable relationship between progressive democratic ideals and state control. In fact, Dubai has established a "Media Free Zone," where restrictions have been loosened on print and broadcast media produced for audiences outside the UAE. Inside the UAE, however, government officials continue to ban websites deemed "morally objectionable." For example, apart from those sites whose content is obviously anti-Islamic or sexual in nature, the reach of censoring bodies extends to blocking any website ending in Israel's domain, "il." Furthermore, the government has banned technologies that allow voice-over-Internet communication, such as Skype, so it can continue to regulate and profit from the telecommunications industry.\textsuperscript{11}

The installment of new censorship regulations has been forced to coexist, often uncomfortably, with the preservation of "authentic" national and cultural values. The TRA has played an important role in this dialectic, particularly with its establishment of an Internet regulatory department, known as Internet Access Management—"a regulatory framework that ensures safe access onto the Internet in an effective and organized way." One of the TRA's primary mandates is that of transparency. As Mohammed Al-Ghanim, director of the TRA, notes, we are targeting the public sector for transparency. We created a common face for our blocked websites: when you click a link, a feedback form is sent to the operators regarding why certain websites should be blocked. … Transparency is one of our values and the values of our committee, most especially to the government and to the public.\textsuperscript{12}

Before the development of the TRA, the communications industry operated in a somewhat unstructured manner with regard to censorship in the UAE. Through my interviews, I found that many websites were blocked for "no valid reason," since the primary mechanisms on which the system of censorship was based was a list of catchwords and catchphrases that filtered through the Internet.\textsuperscript{13} For example, a website on breast cancer was blocked since it was prohibited under the catchword breast. A representative from the NMC explained how this period of censorship was not particularly well defined in what was prohibited; however, sex and anti-Islamic sentiments constituted the "basic premises" of the censorship. Intermittent shutdowns and reversions of websites back into the public sphere also demonstrate the level at which censorship guidelines remained uncategorized before recent developments. For example, Flickr—a social networking website—faced intermittent shutdown over a period of three years due to the fact that photographs uploaded by users are often unauthorized for public viewing.\textsuperscript{14}

In my interviews, I was struck by the comprehensiveness and sophistication of the TRA's structure for regulating the Internet industry, in contrast to previous unsystemized approaches. Its modus operandi is expressed not only in its guidelines and procedures—that is, in the detail in which it was working—but in its presentation of itself as a product of cosmopolitanism: bilingual, technologically sophisticated, and retaining an essence of tradition through gendered social conduct and national cress. The TRA, which falls under the auspices of the government, stands as a product of the Emiratization program installed in the country to encourage civic participation in the sphere of employment. It could be said that the TRA's hiring of national youth is a way in which it can ensure that its employees are attuned to values and traditions or to what would be considered prohibited or culturally transgressive. However, the TRA's employment of nationals—as well as its advocacy of transparency—is an attempt to present discourses of "modernity" and "authenticity" as not necessarily mutually contradictory. The fact that a newly established governing body is able to reinscribe this progression within the local (with regard to national employment) not only serves to affirm the Emirates' discursive embrace of national identity but also facilitates its accommodation within the global arena. Its progressive agenda is not presented as an alternative to "authentic" discourses but rather as one that is coexistent.

The UAE's dilemma about how to maintain its global image has been in many ways thrust upon the post-oil generation. Facilitated by social networking sites, this generation has produced a pan-Gulfian queer imaginary within the context of transnational sociopolitical discourse. The dialectic between visibility and control is critical to the understanding of how queerness is simultaneously contingent on dominant formations.\textsuperscript{15} The policing of sexuality off-line and its attendant dissemination and visibility of queers online has engendered the production of more rigorous censorship laws in the UAE. So while cybertechnology in this context has the potential to transform sexual power structures, it simultaneously reaffirms and violently reproduces others.

Noncensorship and "the Freedom of Subjects under the Law"

My analysis of the interviews presented here reveals that the UAE's simultaneous inscription of democratic ideals regarding freedom in the media and preservation of tradition is inseparable from its preoccupation with its global image and paranoia about regulating bodies. It is through the installment of the government's technologies detailed herein—Internet Access Management and, as will be described, Content Follow-Up—that the Emirates' dilemma between the global
and the local agenda is 'discursively codified.'\textsuperscript{44} Al-Ghanim explained how before the genesis of Internet Access Management, the provider Etisalat, and its competitor Du, implemented censorship categories that were never published. He further explained, "We are now going to publish these guidelines and categories, [which constitute] what is against the moral, cultural, and religious values of the country." He added, "It is an aspect of protecting young people . . . in terms of censorship, if you want to call it that—we prefer to call it Internet Access Management." The most crucial element in Al-Ghanim's statement is his ideologically rhetoric, particularly his modification of the term "censorship" into "Internet Access Management." In fact, a similar alteration of terminology was made by the director of the NMC when he noted that "the NMC is currently in the process of producing something called 'Content Supervision' or 'Content Follow-Up,' as we prefer to call it."\textsuperscript{45} This adjustment of language points to a vigilance regarding the issue of censorship and the nuances inherent in the preferred terminologies of "management" and "supervision."

Describing the mechanisms of Internet regulation alongside the denial of censorship itself, the NMC director stated, "It does not mean that we would have censorship. . . . We will have guidelines, and we expect the 'user providers' to be able to monitor themselves." Although here he explains that there is neither censorship nor supervisory committees but rather "guidelines," my research has found that this is in fact not the case. The TRA representative explained to me that Web-based expressions of homosexuality were to be categorized under "pornography" and that new guidelines will explain in fuller detail the heterogeneous nature of queer subjectivities and their censorship. Moreover, Flickr's battle against intermittent shutdown and its labeling as a "dispute case" with regard to its partial censorship has engendered the implementation of new laws against tasbeeh (fame), designed to protect identities against social abjection. Although governing bodies are bent on restructurizing the media in the name of "progress," the installment of Internet Access Management appears to have engendered the production of a more rigorous and specialized categorical nature to censorship laws in the UAE. The ideological and rhetorical stance articulated in my interviews points to a significant transition from traditionally unorganized modes of censorship to ones that are extremely lucid and transparent. Furthermore, there has been a significant change in the nature of censorship material itself; censored content is no longer determined by a crude categorization along binaries of permissible/forbidden but, rather, is acknowledged in its heterogeneity and evaluated with engaged and nuanced approaches, such as partial blocking, dispute cases, and feedback forms. This particular change sheds light on the nature of the new image of authority: the censor is no longer an untouchable

force, endowed with infallibility; rather, he is attentive, sympathetic, responsive to feedback, and a potential promoter of agency. However, despite the seemingly progressive nature of this approach insofar as the implementation of strict censorship is denied, the new laws under the auspices of Internet Access Management and Content Supervision are in fact more demanding of the subject, who may have greater access to once-forbidden material but now finds him- or herself more powerfully regulated within it.

Arguably, this repositioning of noncensorship reflects a shift toward a neoliberalist ideological stance. In contradistinction to discussions of neoliberalism that highlight its negative relation to state power, Aihwa Ong conceptualizes neoliberalism as a mechanism by which government recasts its activities as "nonpolitical and nonideological problems that need technical solutions."\textsuperscript{46} In the UAE, although social networking tools such as MySpace and Facebook are available, certain group memberships relating to queer subjectivities and homosexualities will be blocked, classified under the rubric of pornography. Users are aware of what is available in cyberspace but are denied full access into that realm. As the NMC director stated, "We want the law to be accepted and absorbed, and we want to respond to the needs of society," and he added, "We are not going to have a supervisory committee; we will leave it to the people to monitor themselves." This position recalls Rose and Miller's observation that political power in the context of liberalism becomes not so much a matter of imposing constraints on citizens as of creating citizens capable of living with regulated freedom.\textsuperscript{47} Unlike in neighboring states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, where hegemony dictates subordination and consent, in the UAE, the subject is regulated within a nuanced hegemonic field, one that demands tolerance of bearing witness to freedom as well as self-regulation in accordance with the law. It is through the freedom of subjects under the law that the state is discursively codified in governmental technologies: "management" and "supervision" affect governmental ambitions of continuing to regulate the subject under the guise of progress. These modes of governmentality seek to replace outright autocracy with a neoliberalist rhetoric, with the effect that regulation masquerades in the name of transparency.

\textbf{Notes}

1. The term \textit{queer subjectivities} is here used to capture the liminality inherent in the expression of sexual practices, as opposed to more fixed, categorical terms, such as \textit{butch identities}.

In my analyses there were no clear references to self-identified homosexualities; the utility of \textit{queer} is to recognize multiple social positions that extend beyond reductive categorizations.

3. For a detailed historical study of the UAE and its position with respect to modernization and globalization, see Christopher Davidson, *The United Arab Emirates: A Study in Survival* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005).


5. Salma Al-Darmaki (Zayed University student), personal e-mail communication to author, February 21, 2009.


8. In recent years, the federal government has made efforts to disseminate discourses of Islamic nationalism through conference forums and scholastic competitions, declaring 2008 to be the Year of National Identity.

9. For a critical reading of Dubai’s political stance in relation to its program of modernization, see Mike Davis, *Fear and Money in Dubai,* New Left Review 41 (September–October 2006): 47–68.


11. Ibid.

12. Students at Zayed University (members of the International Studies Council and participants of the Women as Leaders Conference), interview with author, June 2008, Abu Dhabi, UAE.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. For example, on the judicial level, in accordance with sharia (Islamic jurisprudence), which dictates that women are subject to structural frameworks of wakul al'am (male guardianship) in multiple realms, a signature of approval from a male representative is required for national women to obtain a driver’s license in the UAE.

17. Ruba Al-Hassan (Project Management Office member at Abu Dhabi Government Restoring Values Committee), personal e-mail communication to author, February 17, 2009.


21. I use *boyan* to refer to the plural form of *boya*; however, throughout this chapter various forms appear in both plural ("boyan," "boya") and singular ("boya") usage.


24. Wijdan Al-Murairi (Zayed University student), personal e-mail communication to author, February 21, 2009.


27. This debate has been broadly discussed in relation to various non-Western contexts within queer diasporic scholarship. See, for example, Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalangan IV, eds., *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Cindy Patton and Benigno Sánchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

28. Posting on “WHY AL Boyat Like These!!!” group.


33. Over the past decade, however, government bodies have implemented measures to limit the presence of drag musical groups.


36. Representatives of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, presentation to author.

37. June 2, 2008, Abu Dhabi, UAE.

38. Representations of the TPA, presentation to author.


301 Ladies and Gentlemen, Boyahs and Girls
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