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## Ameliorative Homecomings: Framing the Queer Migrant in *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015) and *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)

Cüneyt Çakırlar

This study critically analyzes representations of the queer migrant subject in two documentaries, *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015) and *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016). Both films construct a drama of conflicting intersections between religion, national belonging, and sexual identity, which is resolved through a normative pull towards home and its affective restructuring of intimacy in the context of queer

migrant subjectivity. The ameliorative status of homecoming operates as a default resolution in these films. A longing for home is that which both films register as the queer migrant's constitutive attachment. These documentaries' (re)domestication of the queer subject seems to promote a neoliberal identity politics of sexual humanitarianism, in which collective struggles are occluded by individual, heroic testimonials of homecoming.

**Keywords:** affect, essay film, first-person, intersectionality, LGBTQ documentary, migration, religion, sexuality, transnationalism

Recent studies in queer visual cultures, including studies of film, documentary, and contemporary art, have extended their focus to transnational, diasporic, and non-anglophone national contexts of cultural production, where the queer subject is associated with intersectional processes of identification and disidentification (Çakırlar 2015; Chambers-Letson 2018; Galt and Schoonover 2016; Gopinath 2005, 2018; Muñoz 1999; White 2015). The majority of these studies tend to prioritize aesthetics and representation, rather than the agency of queer practitioners, and the ways in which their practices navigate and inform the geopolitical, industrial, and institutional operations of the arts, activism, and culture. In this regard, studies of transnational LGBTQ documentaries are of particular importance, as their articulations of first-person and/or testimonial voices promise to bring the queer subject's agency into the aesthetic operations of form, style, and representation. Paying close attention to documentary film in the study of queer visual cultures can enhance existing conceptualizations of access, inclusion, and agency in queer cultural production vis-à-vis the neoliberal status quo. Nonfiction forms of representation carry the potential to expose the contemporary politics of value that are embedded in artistic expression and the ideological processes of its commodification. Critical explorations of queer documentary filmmaking can also make a significant

contribution to debates that problematize issues of inclusivity and mobility amid the contemporary art sector's continuously transforming 'ethnographic turns' and anthropological trends (Çakırlar 2011; Çakırlar 2013; Foster 1996).

This article takes LGBTQ documentary as a point of entry into a wider critical debate on intersectionality and visibility in contemporary queer politics. Recent developments in transnational queer scholarship have opened the way for cultural narratives that contest the East-West or South-North dichotomies within contemporary representations of marginal sexualities by acknowledging the voice and agency of local LGBTQ practitioners, activists, artists, and communities (Bao 2020; Çakırlar 2016; Haritaworn 2015; Puar 2008). Yet the ways in which value and voice are assigned to an identitarian visibility within the international and intersectional contexts of media production has to be questioned. Given that LGBTQ tolerance has been co-opted as a branding tool by states and political parties in national and international politics, neoliberal forms of identitarian visibility may also work to corrode the radical foundations of queer and feminist politics (Salem 2016). Recent intersectionality-focused debates within queer and feminist theory have also driven a critique of this new and politically corrosive neoliberal visibility. Sirma Bilge (2013) argues:

'Neoliberal assumptions create the conditions allowing the founding conceptions of intersectionality to become diluted, disciplined, and disarticulated [...] A depoliticized intersectionality is particularly useful to a neoliberalism that reframes all values as market values: identity-based radical politics are often turned into corporatized diversity tools leveraged by dominant groups to attain various ideological and institutional goals; a range of minority struggles are incorporated into a market-driven and state-sanctioned governmentality of diversity; 'diversity' becomes a feature of neoliberal management, providing 'managerial precepts of good government and efficient business operations'; knowledge of 'diversity' can be presented as marketable expertise in understanding and deploying multiple forms of difference simultaneously—a sought-after signifier of sound judgment and professionalism' (pp. 407-408).

Bilge's framing of neoliberalism can help us to understand the deradicalization of contemporary identitarian dissent, and to discern how the investment of intersectional identity politics in 'visibility' and 'inclusion' resonates with Lillie Chouliaraki's (2013) conceptualization of the 'humanitarian imaginary.' For Chouliaraki (2013), this imaginary is 'part of a dispersed communicative structure of cosmopolitan ethics that mundanely acts as a moralizing force upon western public life' (pp. 3–4). 'Our moral encounter with human vulnerability,' Chouliaraki (2013) argues, 'is now cast in a particular logic of the market' (p. 5). Drawing on Chouliaraki's framing of visibility, vulnerability, and representational value, Nick Mai (p. 176) suggests that the global politics of sexual humanitarianism 'recreate[s] the notion of a unified, West-centric and hierarchical humanity around essentialized and moralized understandings of secularism, gender and sexuality. (p. 176)' Sexual humanitarianism, according to Mai (2014, 2018), 'acts as a form of symbolic governance [...] by separating the extreme victimhood of targeted others from a moralized, globalized and unified humanity,' which 'prevents [the privileged] citizens of the global North [...] from reflecting on their own

increasing exploitability, commodification and alienation in neoliberal times' (2014: 176-177). How does documentary contain the intersectional queer subject and authenticate its vulnerability within this market-driven neoliberal context of visibility? Does the prevalence of the humanitarian imaginary in documentary representation obscure and compromise the political efficacy of the first-person documentary subject?

Reflecting on contemporary modes of (post-)humanitarian communication, Niamh Ní Mhaoileoin (2017) argues:

'[That which Chouliaraki identifies as a shift in spectatorship] from a pity-based ethics of solidarity [...] to a self-centred ironic solidarity [...] is vividly apparent in certain types of LGBT rights activism, which treat politically contingent, context-specific attacks on sexual minorities as an attack on all gays everywhere, minimizing the experience of local victims, ignoring the political specificities of different states, and centring the experience of western spectators' (p. 151).

Conversely, pointing to the 'contradictory ideological affinities [...] [of] transnational LGBTQ documentaries within [their] various textual, discursive and political operations,' I have elsewhere argued that the regional affiliations of these documentary practices 'accommodate the potential to intervene into the global symbolic governance of sexual humanitarianism [...] [while] also run[ning] the risk of reproducing its discourse of victimhood' (Çakırlar 2017: 58). To further navigate these complex layers of value and visibility in nonfiction media, this study aims to explore the ways in which the queer migrant, as a subject of intersectionality, operates ideologically within documentary filmic modes of representation that invest in identity, empowerment, and the testimonial. The documentaries chosen for analysis share an individualizing humanitarian impulse to portray and authenticate the queer migrant's experience of displacement. In reference to portrait documentaries that combine what Bill Nichols (1992) once categorized as 'expository' and 'performative' modes, Pooja Rangan (2017) argues that voice-over and voice-as-metaphor in such documentaries 'combine didactic exposition and an emotive, embodied and expressive mode of address' (p. 113). Rangan (2017) notes that this identitarian ethos is

'an indication of the enduring logocentric—and by extension humanitarian—investments of documentary studies in the speaking voice as a measure of humanity [that] [...] convinces us forcefully of the validity, authenticity and legitimacy of the speaker's interior existence' (p. 134).

The analyses of the documentaries selected for this study will examine the paradoxical efforts to construct a coherent migrant subject and re-domesticate it through a redemptive pathos of homecoming, which obscures the subject's relational status and impedes the political efficacy of its visibility.

Informed by the theoretical field outlined above, this study will critically analyze two recent documentaries, Parvez Sharma's *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015) and Tomer and Barak Heymann's *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016). Prioritizing the mode of portrait documentary, both films tackle issues of intimacy, belonging, and queer migrant subjectivity. Sharma's *A Sinner*

*in Mecca* documents the filmmaker's journey from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia for his *hajj* pilgrimage. Using an essayistic, first-person documentary mode, Sharma constructs a tension around his attachments to nation, religion, and sexuality. While the film offers a critique of religion as a punitive state apparatus, Sharma's pronounced proprietorial relation to a migrant gay Muslim identity functions in progressive counter-valence. Yet the themes prioritized within *A Sinner in Mecca* are informed by a humanitarian framework of identity politics, and a dramatization of precarity and transgression. Sharma's promotion of identity risks overlooking complex modes of intersectionality and obscuring the differences in intimate belonging that various queer Muslim communities attach to Islam around the world. Heymanns' portrait documentary, *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?*, tells the story of Saar, an Israeli gay man who was expelled from his Jewish community in Israel and emigrated to London. Treating Saar's HIV diagnosis as the marker of an affective crisis, the film oscillates between two distinct spaces of domesticity: Saar's family and *kibbutz* in Israel, and his network of friends in the U.K. Exploring the difficulties Saar experiences as a result of his family's prejudices against his sexual orientation and HIV status, the film attempts to document the ways in which he negotiates his attachments to friends, family, community, and nation. That which redeems the queer migrant subject in this film is Saar's return to Israel. In both films, the conflict between religion, family, national belonging, and sexual identity is resolved through a normative pull towards home and its affective structuring of intimacy in the context of queer migrancy. The ameliorative status of homecoming operates as an ideological and affective default in these films. The longing for home is that which both films register as the constitutive attachment of the queer migrant.

The analyses below focus on how these films represent domesticity and intimate attachments not only within their depictions of family, home, and nation, but also within the authentication of the queer documentary subject's identity. The documentary essayism in both films is significantly informed by the ways in which they attach value to different registers of domesticity in order to contain and resolve the queer migrant subject's drama of belonging and displacement. Through an investment in the confessional, what these films present as the experience of queerness and migration is reduced to individualized journeys that culminate in the empowerment of the subject-as-victim/as-survivor, which is realized only through a redemptive experience of homecoming. In both cases, the emphasis on inclusion and reassimilation obscures the political contexts in which the figures of the queer migrant are produced, circulated, and received, both locally and globally.

### 1. Authenticating Intersectional Queerness in *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015)

Efforts to authenticate experiences of intersectional queerness run the risk of obscuring the political affinities of queer subjectivity by overinvesting in a neoliberal logic of value extraction that operates through representational

visibility. In this sense, Parvez Sharma's documentary practice can be considered a strong case that shows the ways in which intersectional queer politics is appropriated through confessional modes of documentary representation. The discussion of Sharma's work in this section is not intended as an indictment, but as a critical exploration of such appropriations of intersectionality within documentary practice. Sharma's practice demonstrates the extent to which a neoliberal logic of empowerment and visibility impedes the political efficacy of confessional narratives and first-person documentary.

Sharma's debut film, *A Jihad for Love* (2007), was one of the most significant and influential transnational LGBTQ documentaries. *Jihad* focuses on the experiences of people who identify as gay Muslims in various parts of the world. The film can also be said to address a particularly xenophobic mode of transnational gaze that is directed at Islam-as-religion and Muslimness-as-identity: a universalizing gaze that appropriates sexual liberation as an ideological instrument to challenge that which is presupposed to be essentially homophobic in Islam (Puar 2008). Affirming both their faith and sexual identity, *Jihad's* subjects contest the ideologically constructed oppositions between Islam and queer sexuality, which, as Rebecca Beirne and Samar Habib (2012) also suggest, are 'used in Western discourse to critique Middle Eastern cultures as necessarily in need of Western intervention and enlightenment, overlooking a more nuanced understanding of these contexts' (p. 42). While Sharma fixes his intersectional framework through faith and sexuality, his ethnographic approach is informed by a supranational, cross-regional scale; the film's sampling enables the filmmaker to 'offer an in-depth discussion of Islam's diverse relationships with homosexuality across the Middle East, Asia and Africa' (Beirne and Habib 2012: 43). In other words, *Jihad's* take on Muslim identity is nuanced, not due to an intensive focus on any single, national context, but through its exploration of individual life stories from various backgrounds. The queer Muslim subject in the film becomes an amalgamation of multiple 'Islamicate' subject positions and contexts (Traub 2008). In other words, *Jihad's* investment in supranational diversity authenticates intersectional queerness by suspending an individualizing logic of representation, articulating a polyvocal, first-person plural documentary mode, and thus complicating the familiar spectacles of victimhood constructed by the Western humanitarian imaginary.

In *A Sinner in Mecca*, however, Sharma's documentary approach moves to a first person singular, essayistic documentary mode. The film's use of reflection, identity, and visibility operates differently as compared with *Jihad*. *A Sinner in Mecca* is about the filmmaker's own journey from the U.S. to Saudi Arabia for his *hajj* pilgrimage. The *hajj* to Mecca is a mandatory religious duty for all Muslims, and must be undertaken at least once in a lifetime. As Sharma regards his faith in Islam as 'a central part of his very being,' this pilgrimage of an openly gay, Muslim filmmaker, who has been publicly condemned as an infidel by various international Muslim organizations, becomes the filmmaker's political subject of screen activism. As the analysis below demonstrates, Sharma's insistence on the singularity of *A Sinner's* documentary subject and his transgressive '*hajj* of defiance' (Sharma 2017) results in a depoliticized

spectacle, rather than in what Gina Machetti's analysis (2020) of Nanfu Wang's *Hooligan Sparrow* (2016) identifies as a documentary aesthetic of a politically agitative, multi-scalar, community-building activism in the first-person.

The film's sensationalist investment in gay Muslim identity is visible from its very beginning. It opens with Sharma chatting online with a gay man from Saudi Arabia, who has witnessed the public beheading of another gay man. It then cuts to the video footage of an actual beheading scene, which is followed by Sharma's dramatic performance of ablution, with blood, in *ihram* clothing, the garment worn by Muslims on pilgrimage. These opening scenes animate Sharma's reclamation of identity. Reminding the audience that homosexuality is punishable by death in Saudi Arabia, and that filming is forbidden in Mecca during the pilgrimage, Sharma says, 'Once again I am in the closet, not only as a gay pilgrim but also as a filmmaker.' Through his expressive use of first-person voice-over and editing, Sharma constructs a tension around his attachments to nation, religion, family, and sexuality. While the film offers a critique of sectarianism within Wahhabi Islam and its operation as a punitive state apparatus in Saudi Arabia, Sharma's pronounced proprietorial relation to a migrant gay Muslim identity functions in progressive counter-valence.

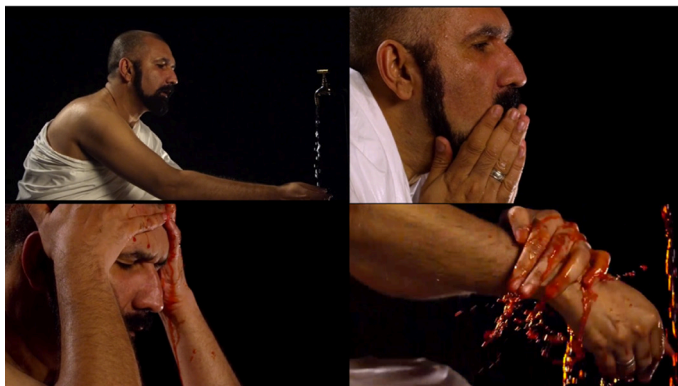


Figure 1. The ablution scene in *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015)

Sharma's essayism seeks to match a first-person account of queer migrancy with the diasporic subject's mobility between different registers of home and identity. The film's logic of visibility and voice works to dramatize the queer migrant subject's sense of unbelonging, which is to be redeemed through a re-domestication of the intersectional queer self. Here, expressive editing, essayistic voice-over, and a tone of documentary activism resonates with one of the pioneering queer documentaries, Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989). And yet the ethics of self-representation in these films differ dramatically. Riggs's performance of 'hesitation vis-à-vis personal revelation [...] complicates and frustrates viewers' impulses to acquire or colonize [Riggs's] experiences through narrative empathy,' as Anderst (2019: 75) argues. As against this, a confessional discourse and the pathos of vulnerability in Sharma's film prioritizes the empathy of the humanitarian spectator. Both Riggs and Sharma adopt a first-person voice to address the experience of intersectional



queerness, yet their engagements with identity and identification function differently. *Tongues Untied* enacts *queer* diaspora by investing in an aesthetic of disidentification that fosters the political imagination of a black gay community. *A Sinner in Mecca*, however, individualizes the intersectional migrant queer subject by capitalizing on the exposure and revelation of a drama of clashing identifications. Whereas Riggs's first-person voice moves from the singular to the plural, and invests in political mobilization, Sharma's voice works as a depoliticized confessional that brands its individualized drama in an address to the humanitarian spectator. Whereas *Tongues Untied* constructs intersectional queerness in its radical refusal of identitarian assimilation, the confessional mode in *A Sinner* consolidates its migrant subject through a crisis in domesticity, wherein identitarian realignments are presented as the default resolution. 'I must go on this journey,' Sharma says in the film, and adds: 'I need to prove that I can be a good Muslim and be gay.' Here, intersectionality is reified and commodified through a neoliberal, confessional lens. The queer migrant subject's identifications, though in intersection with one another, function as singular, insular, and monolithic identity markers in the film.

On his wedding day in New York, Sharma shows to the camera the three items he was required to bring with himself for the ceremony: a copy of the Quran, his U.S. residence permit, and a photograph of his mother. These three items mark the three signifiers of belonging that also inform the film's logic of editing in narrating Sharma's journey between New York City, India, and Saudi Arabia. Throughout *A Sinner*, Sharma intercuts the secretly recorded video footage of his pilgrimage to Mecca with footage of his journey to Sharanpur in Northern India, where he was born and raised. The film also cuts to footage of him with his partner, the dinner parties they have with their friends in their flat in New York City. Sharma's crosscutting between these three different modes of domesticity, family, and communal belonging further dramatizes his experience of displacement. While the *hajj* pilgrimage to Mecca is a journey to the holy home of Islam, Sharma's visit to Sharanpur is a confrontation with his dead mother, whom he abandoned. Mecca and Sharanpur both function as homes from which Sharma feels ostracized. His current life in the U.S., however, is a life of new attachments to a queer community and to a partner.



Figure 2. Framing belonging and domesticity in *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015)



Reflecting upon his mother's anger and her rejection of Sharma's lifestyle, the filmmaker asks: 'Did the shame of my sexuality kill her?' Going through the letters his mother left behind in Sharanpur, Sharma continues: 'My mother's anger was relentless and my shame eternal. I want to be a pilgrim that she would be proud of.' The essayistic voice present throughout the film is the voice of a queer migrant who negotiates the effects of these contradictory belongings: (i) the guilt and the shame Sharma's mother (or the motherland) has engendered, (ii) the fear and alienation that the holy home of Islam triggers, due to Sharma's criminalized sexual identity, and (iii) the 'political' conscience that Sharma's queer identity provokes, and his attempt to redeem his shame, guilt, and fear by way of a reattachment to the mother(land) and to Islam, or in other words, to his family and past, and to his faith.



Figure 3. Sharma at Kaaba, *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015)

Sharma documents his experience of pilgrimage through a journalistic portrayal of Mecca. As well as showing his fellow Muslims' performances of *hajj* rituals, he also cuts to images in which the city is seen as a site of demolition and as a site of consumer culture. Sharma uses his footage to expose the erasure of Islam's rich history and heritage in these demolished sites. The filmmaker also uses images of a shopping mall close to the very center of Islam, the *Kaaba*, which, in his view, manifests Mecca's transformation into a mecca of capitalism, converting its pilgrims into eager shoppers. 'My faith seems to disappear in this very place,' he says.

The essayistic framework, which combines an editorial documentary mode with a reflective voiceover, helps Sharma to dramatize his sense of displacement and detachment from a particular place that symbolizes Islam. The spectacle of risk and transgression in the film becomes a test of faith and endurance. Sharma says, 'I need evidence that my faith is strong enough to survive this journey.' Therefore, that which redeems Sharma's identity crisis as a gay Muslim is his ability to survive his pilgrimage, in spite of all that Mecca signifies in the context of a sectarian, fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam, led by the Saudi state. At the end of his journey, Sharma reflects on his feelings: 'What is gone is the part of me that wondered if Islam would accept me. In its place is the understanding that it is up to me as a gay Muslim to accept Islam [...] I can finally feel my mother's love now—through her poetry.'

The redemption or the amelioration of the gay Muslim subject in the film, then, depends on 'finding [its] own place in Islam.' Yet Sharma's testimonial seems to overlook precisely what this journey did to his attachments to gayness and Muslimness as markers of identity, and what kind of place he has carved out for himself within Islam, and within the global LGBTQ community. Sharma's investment in this sensationalist documentary spectacle of risk and transgression leaves these identity categories insular and fixed. In contrast to Riggs's engagement with the categories of black and gay, Sharma's engagement with the categories of Muslim and gay does not attend to their intersectional operations. It is not relational and intimate enough to produce a critique beyond the individual testimonial, and the heroic achievements of transgressive and ameliorative homecomings. Rather than enacting a critical migrant 'accent,' or assuming what Sujata Moorti (2003) would regard as a 'diasporic optic' that fragments and hybridizes the first-person subject, the redemptive pathos of reattachment domesticates the migrant subject (p. 359), and produces a subject of multiple identitarian assimilations.

Perhaps ironically, a significantly more nuanced and textured take on intersectional queerness is present in the memoir Sharma published two years after the release of *A Sinner in Mecca*, entitled *A Sinner in Mecca: A Gay Muslim's Hajj of Defiance* (2017). The significant differences in Sharma's creative practice between these two different registers of essayistic expression, namely the first-person documentary film and the memoir, deserves another in-depth study; one that would address the ways in which Sharma engages the medium-specific possibilities and limitations of the essay in its literary and audiovisual forms.

## 2. The Cruel Optimism of Domesticity in *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)

Tomer and Barak Heymann's portrait documentary, *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?*, offers a similar take on homecoming as an unquestionably redemptive act for the queer migrant subject. The film tells the story of Saar, an Israeli gay man who has been expelled from his Jewish community in Israel and has emigrated to London. Treating Saar's HIV diagnosis as the marker of a new search for intimacy, and as an affective crisis of belonging, the film oscillates between two distinct spaces of domesticity: Saar's family in Israel, and his life in London, where he is surrounded by his circle of friends in the London Gay Men's Choir. Exploring the difficulties that Saar experiences as a result of his family's religious prejudices against his sexual orientation and HIV status, the film attempts to document the ways in which he reflects on his attachments to nation, home, and family. That which redeems the queer migrant subject in this film is Saar's reconciliation with his family and, ultimately, his return to Israel. The film resolves the conflict between religion, national belonging, migrancy, and sexual identity through a normative pull towards home and nation. This latter promises an ameliorative homecoming that enables the queer subject to renegotiate that which 'really counts' as intimate connection, and as family.



Figure 4. Saar visiting Israel, *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)

The film begins with a depiction of Saar's everyday life in London. It shows Saar's house, his regular visits to the sexual health clinic for his blood screenings, and his rehearsals with the London Gay Men's Choir. At first glance, the choir is presented as Saar's extended family, an anchor for his sense of communal belonging to queer identity and kinship, which operates as a positive, inclusive representation of what Joseph Massad (2002) conceptualizes as the 'Gay International.' Yet the overall representation of Saar's life in London is framed through the sense of isolation, depression, and loneliness that the film associates with his HIV diagnosis. Saar considers his situation to be 'bad karma,' and his desire to turn to his roots and family is clearly linked to what being HIV+ has made him feel. Reflecting on this, he says: 'They give me power, they are my souls. They are my roots. Without them I am a tree without roots [...] Of course I wish I could have a family of my own but that's not going to happen. There was a fuck up in that plan. I got sick.' This longing for intimacy is explored in a conversation with his lover on a bench at the Southbank in London. They talk about Saar's defensive attitude to this relationship. The lover construes Saar's distance from his family as an effect of his withdrawal from any form of compassion and love post diagnosis. 'You don't let me in. There were times when we were making love, I couldn't get you look me in the eye,' the lover says. And he continues: 'You know what—as soon as I got my diagnosis, the first thought that came into my head was: *who's gonna love me now?*' Interestingly, this moment of indexical naming, the utterance of the film's title, is not presented as part of the couple's own drama of romance. Instead, it grounds the film's drama of homecoming, which seems to be triggered by Saar's diagnosis. In fact, the question, 'Who's gonna love an HIV+ gay man?,' becomes the driving force for the film's narrative and its pathos of return.

This 'who's gonna love me now?' moment makes the film swerve to a relational register where intimate connections and their weight in Saar's life are renegotiated through hierarchies of value. The film cuts from this emotionally laden conversation with the lover to Saar's attic, which is presented as a place tied to Saar's memory of the past—a memory of the home(land) and the family he left behind in Israel. He goes through the letters of his

father, whom the film portrays as a patriot—a retired general of the Israeli army, who now trains paratroopers in Israel. Saar reads one of these letters in front of the camera. This letter, he says, ended his relationship with his father. 'London is not waiting for you. Neither is any other place. You need to pull yourself together and return to the place you ran away from,' his father had written. The film's focus on these moments legitimates the path to homecoming as the only redemptive path for Saar. Focusing on Saar's visit to Israel and his parents' visits to London, the film becomes a project to reconnect Saar with his family by documenting moments of their confrontation, and, most importantly, by documenting his determination in his search for acceptance, familial connection, and mutual empathy. This is one of the key differences between the registers of home and domesticity in these two documentaries' portrayal of the queer migrant subject: whereas Islam and Muslimness are at the center of Sharma's journey, Saar's drama of belonging in *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* is centered on family and nation, rather than religion and/or Saar's reflections on his identification as Jewish.

As with the constitutive role Sharma's mother plays in *A Sinner in Mecca's* narrative of return and redemption, Saar's mother is also of key significance in facilitating the pathos of homecoming as the affective default in *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* Documenting the mother's visit to London, the film uses her hesitant tolerance to present a maternal subject that highlights and negotiates the contradictions the film presents between different registers of home and domesticity. Confrontational conversations between Saar and his mother further dramatize the queer migrant subject's paradoxes of belonging. While Saar's life in London is presented as an anchor that affirms his sexual identity, his family in Israel is shown as another anchor that reattaches him to home. Through the bridging function the film grants to maternal love and tolerance, the portrayal of the queer migrant subject gains 'an epistemological density accrued to having a mother' (Young 2020: 451). Yet the film instrumentalizes Saar's seropositive status and reduces the mother's presence to a subject of parental compassion and forgiveness to register, affirm, and reciprocate Saar's vulnerability. It is the mother who facilitates Saar's return and familial inclusion, which realigns the queer subject with the heteronormative constellations of family, kinship, and nation.

The film initially depicts Saar's homeland through a setting in which religious conservatism and militarist nationalism intersect and inform a heteronormative investment in family, kinship, and children. Recurring references in the family members' testimonials to their young children and newly born babies, and to the risk of their exposure to HIV, cast the image of homeland as an ideological space of 'reproductive futurism,' as theorized by the queer theorist Lee Edelman (2004). Saar, as a seropositive queer migrant, is situated against this 'reproductive futurism' and its investment in the heteronormative and nationalist ideal of 'the Child.' Saar is considered an outsider and threat to this heteronormative life. Given that he is himself a former IDF paratrooper, and that his father still trains paratroopers, Saar's emigration to the U.K. and the 17 years he has spent in London is taken by most fam-

ily members, especially his father, as an irresponsible choice that betrays everything they value and believe in. As the film progresses, Saar confronts the hypocrisy of his family's nationalist values and religious beliefs by exposing their homophobia. Referring to his family's misinformed judgments and their discriminatory attitudes towards his HIV status, Saar expresses his disappointment with their resistance to welcome him back home, which, he asserts to one of his brothers, contradicts the 'façade of martyrdom' their values are founded upon. However, Saar's onscreen critique of his family's uncompromising commitment to the *kibbutz* does not extend to a wider and more direct ideological critique of Israeli politics. The film limits itself to showing the proud militarism that Saar's father performs before the camera at Ammunition Hill, using Yoram Taharlev's *Givat Hatachmoshet* [Ammunition Hill] as a soundtrack to highlight the father's celebratory embrace of the Six Day War as constitutive marker of his national identity. Individualizing Saar's longing for connection and reconciliation, and reducing it to a drama of familial intimacy, the film obscures the political question of Israel-Palestine and excludes any discursive reference to it. Whereas the family's homophobia and HIV-phobia are presented as the main conflict in need of resolution, Israel's ongoing dispossession of the Palestinians is never explicitly addressed throughout the film.



Figure 5. Saar with his family in Israel, *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)

Moreover, the film prioritizes Saar's battle for familial acceptance, rather than his current life with his friends and chosen family in London. The rehearsals of the London Gay Men's Choir function as decorative interludes within the documentary's narrative of homecoming. The choir members seem to provide the viewer with an image of the global LGBTQ community, whose solidarity with Saar normalizes, in supporting and facilitating, his journey of redemption, empowerment, and search for family and love. This redemptive pathos, which presupposes a wounded and victimized migrant subject in need of amelioration, resonates with what Lauren Berlant (2011) identifies as 'cruel optimism.' 'The optimism is cruel,' Berlant (2011) argues,



'when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming' (p. 2).

Undermining Saar's relations of queer kinship, the film domesticates its queer migrant subject through its cruel optimism of a sacrosanct self and its reassimilation into family and nation.



Saar returns home and starts his new job at the Israel AIDS Task Force. He invites the members of the London Gay Men's Choir to give a concert at Ammunition Hill, a national memorial site that the film associates with Saar's father and his ideological affiliations. Ammunition Hill became a national memorial site after 1967, when Israel waged a war, illegally annexed Jerusalem, and occupied Gaza and the West Bank. Celebrating Saar's homecoming and his reunion with his father, the London Gay Men's Choir's concert at Ammunition Hill attains a further ideological function, staging the inclusion of the queer subject in a war museum built to monumentalize the Six Day War. This 'poetic' resolution conflates homonormativity with homonationalism and obscures the—contested—status of Israel as a settler-colonial state (Puar 2013; Puar and Mikdashi 2012). In its concluding and restorative role, the concert further exacerbates the film's pinkwashed celebration of Saar's return home, and, moreover, serves to decouple Saar from the choir. Thus, the ending consolidates the film's ideological work: Saar's story is individualized, and Saar's separation from the LGBTQ community he was once a part of is endorsed through the choir's participation in the celebratory spectacle at Ammunition Hill. This individualization within the film's representational system produces absences and silences that

Figure 6. Shot of the London Gay Men's Choir as interlude (left) and the film's poster (right), *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* (2016)

create a hierarchy in values, attached to different intimate belongings. Taking familial inclusion and national belonging as its default, the film obscures the costs of the choices Saar has made in his return to Israel. Ironically, the film's official poster shows a photomontage of Saar, in which the members of the London Gay Men's Choir are embedded within the image of his portrait—as if the film were about this chosen family and Saar's deep attachment to a collective LGBTQ identity, contradicting that which the film actually prioritizes, through its valorization of homecoming, kinship, nation, and the heteronormative family.

### 3. In Place of a Conclusion

In his critical exploration of diasporic and exilic films, Hamid Naficy (2001) uses 'accent' as a trope to identify the ways in which these filmmaking practices could be considered as an aesthetic response to the experience of displacement. 'Exilic and diasporic accent,' Naficy argues, 'permeates the film's deep structure: its narrative, visual style, characters, subject matter, theme and plot' (2001: 23). Departing from Naficy, and complicating the trope of accent in diasporic cultural practice with queer intersectionality, Gopinath argues (2005) that 'the critical framework of a specifically queer diaspora [...] [bears the potential] to unsettle the ways in which the diaspora shores up the gender and sexual ideologies of dominant nationalism on the one hand, and processes of globalisation on the other.' (p.10). This critically productive intersectional analysis of migrant subjectivity has been widely used in recent scholarship in documentary studies, including in studies of the essay film (Hollweg and Krstic 2019). For example, Elif Akçalı (2019) argues that essayistic practices in documentary filmmaking bear a categorical proximity to accented films, as both engage with, and often unsettle, the unitary coherence of the subject. In these critical frameworks, the aesthetics of migratory dissent is derived from the subject's experience of migration as an irreversibly de-domesticated becoming. Such conceptions of non-unitary subjectivity open up the subject of first-person documentary and transform it into a relational and potentially subversive subject that 'can enact the political' (Lebow 2012: 3–4; Lebow 2013: 258).

Yet accent does not always guarantee critique and dissent, especially in first-person documentary modalities. The encounter between the accented subject and a neoliberal confessional culture may obscure the political valency of the first-person lens, by exposing the subject to the commodifying fields of a spectacular, humanitarian vision. In their work on testimonial cultures, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (2001) argue that 'the desire to tell one's own story can easily support particular neo-liberal or even conservative agendas based on a heroic construction of the individual and of the individual self' (p. 4). Stories of redemption produce heroic individuals, whose achievements restores their subjectivity and grants it the safety of an identity. In this sense, both *A Sinner in Mecca* and *Who's Gonna Love Me Now?* frame the queer migrant through the desexualized, depoliticized, and restorative achievement of homecoming.



Naficy (2001) argues that 'return occupies a primary place in the minds of exiles and a disproportionate amount of space in their films' (p. 229). While the primary place of the migrant subject's homecoming bears a potential to articulate a productive dissolution of the subject (Prime 2014), both of the documentaries analyzed above fold the queer subject into the normative domesticity of national identity, and thus fail to deliver a critique of home and of its cruel promise of belonging. Appropriating 'vulnerability as a political language' (Koivunen et al. 2020), and locating it within the corrosive, market-driven neoliberal identity politics of sexual humanitarianism, these narratives seem to promote a particular mode of cruel optimism in their (re)-domestication of the queer migrant subject. Collective struggles are occluded by individual, heroic testimonials of homecoming. That which authenticates the intersectional queer subject here, and which facilitates the humanitarian documentary register in both films, is a spiritual and familial homecoming that redeems and heals the individual queer self. These ameliorative homecomings guarantee a better, happier life for queer migrant subjects, yet capture neither the collective struggles their lives depend upon, nor the political contexts in which they are figured.

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