

Article

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Playful Indifference in a Hyper-Engaged Field

Marie Rask Bjerre Odgaard

This article starts with a provocation: *can* and *should* we be playfully indifferent to the differences that keep us from being able to trust each other? Can we imagine playing together in fieldwork and beyond in ways that allow our differences to not be made an object of scrutiny? Beginning from a seemingly minor yet weighty utterance—‘I trust you’ by a friend and mentor in Amman, Jordan—I reflect on the preoccupation with difference that can emerge when writing ethnographically about queer life and relations in contexts where visible gender and sexual ‘difference’ is both charged and potentially dangerous. This leads me to consider anthropology’s ambiguous role in both studying and defending the importance of social and cultural difference, and the role of identity politics in decolonial iterations of anthropology. Drawing on Madhavi Menon (2015) and especially Naisargi N. Davé’s (2023) recent theorization of indifference as a queer virtue, alongside María Lugones’s (1987) notion of playfulness as an openness to world-travelling, I develop the concept of ‘playful indifference’ both as a response to the politics of queer relation-building among artists and activists in Amman and as a suggestion as to how we might mobilize playfulness in order to remain open to trusting relations and the possibility of becoming otherwise (Povinelli, 2012). *Playful indifference* is proposed as a relational ethic and a politics of solidarity that observes, but also willfully disregards, paranoid hyper-attention to positionality and moralizing impulses of difference-making.

Keywords: activism, ethics, indifference, playfulness, politics

As anthropologists, I think we all have those moments in our ethnographic fieldwork that stick with us—or that get stuck in our thinking. Moments that we, when thinking of indifference in the sense that this word is often used in colloquial language, feel anything *but* indifferent to. One of these moments for me was when Miriam¹ told me something in 2021. This was after we had been going over a text I was writing, inspired by conversations with her. We were at her house in a central neighborhood in Amman, Jordan, accompanied by her cat. Miriam was—and is—a long-time conversation partner during fieldwork in Amman and a mentor on all matters queer, art, and activism in the country. She very simply said, ‘I trust you’ as I was leaving her place. We both knew it would be a good while before we would see each other again, as I was traveling back to Denmark to finish my dissertation.

At the time, her words overwhelmed me. How could she—and I—know whether I could be trusted? Trusted with the immense responsibility of writing about queer artistry and queer lives in Amman, a topic with so many possibilities for being politicized. This topic and project lend themselves

easily to critique from the perspective of current approaches to postcolonial contexts and identity politics. What did that trust entail for Miriam? For me? In my hyper-engagement at the time, it felt like a punch in the stomach—and, in the days that followed, a heaviness that left me wanting to stop putting words on paper. I wanted nothing more than for her to trust me with the task of writing and with staying true to what she had taught me over the years.

Miriam is known in the arts community in Amman to be forthright about her opinions and views. She is someone you will turn to for honest advice—but also the kind of advice that at first feels impossible to follow. Throughout the years, several people in Amman recounted specific observations made by Miriam at an early stage of rupture in their lives. Some of these observations had referred to their relationships to parents, partners, or other family members. Some had been in relation to leaving the country or to confronting their own desires. Her words kept resonating and pushing them ahead in their life choices.

But at the same time, Miriam's declared trust weighed on me because I didn't trust myself at that point. After years of critically—at times bordering on navel-gazing—examining my role as an anthropologist and as a Northern European woman working in an Arab-majority country in the so-called Middle East, with all the contextual history that this entails (including how I came to represent 'the North,' and how the region in which I work came to be termed 'the Middle East'), how could I trust myself?

There was so much to be hesitant about in that positionality and in the structures that had enabled it. While intersectional agendas originally built by Black feminist scholars had been so incredibly important to so many scholars coming after, their intention had never been an obsession with difference, but a politics of friendship and solidarity, and a radical commitment to finding ways to work against multiple oppressions being reproduced (Harney & Moten, 2013; Lugones, 1987). But from a paranoid reading (Sedgwick, 1997) of anthropology, there are reasons enough for a hesitant—or even abolitionist—attitude to the discipline itself (Jobson, 2020). I had a fear of going along with the liberal focus on producing marginalized groups and identities through writing about them and their unique identity claims, rather than from the midst and mess of actual relations. In addition to this simultaneously theoretical and relational fear, I had developed a watchfulness born out of working in a place with a highly competent intelligence apparatus that keeps an eye on all activist labor and visibility while framing their non-conformist opinions as breaches to national security. Well-meaning colleagues told me: 'Do not allow your friends to be present with their own names in your work, even if they so desire. Do not trust yourself, nor them in their vulnerable positions.' They suggested to trust the academic institution and its tried and tested protocols, spaces where trust becomes legal obligation.

There was so much to feel strongly about. There were too many differences made and reinforced between us for trust to seem possible.

Can we trust in playing with indifference?

At different points in time, queer activists and artists in Amman have made spaces for being together, spaces that quite quickly had to make visible for whom they were meant and why, in order to stay afloat, which also made them visible targets for moral scrutiny based on the difference they are perceived to introduce to society. I will return to such spaces, but for now I will mention that spending time with activists and artists that constantly play at the edge of 'too much' engagement from the surroundings has made me consider some of the differences that are central to decolonizing the anthropological discipline. Beyond any individually manifested paranoia, difference plays a central role in how Deleuzian poststructuralist and some decolonial scholars have defined their *raison d'être*, or when Derrida (2000, p. 7) says '...yes to who or what turns up' against modernist claims to authenticity, sameness, and identity. Difference also, obviously, plays a central role in anthropology, whether in critiques of its colonial legacies of studying sameness and difference in far-away societies as a mirror of the imperial project, or through cultural relativism's (moral) project of describing co-existing differences, especially in the North American tradition following Franz Boas and later Clifford Geertz (Brown, 2008). Difference also stands at the center of intersectional thought, which has been crucial for decolonizing anthropology and the anthropologist (Haraway, 1998). As Marilyn Strathern (2020) has pointed out, cultural and societal ways of working out relations are key to understanding why, in Anglo-European contexts, we have become interested in sameness and difference as a way of conceptualizing the individual's relation to others. While in modern Anglo-European thinking, the individual was separated as different from close relatives and kin, speaking of sameness between the individual and its kin was still essential to underscoring how there are even greater degrees of difference between that individual and those who are outside the kin relation (see also Sahlins, 2013). For a conservative version of identity politics, built on a similar kind of sameness-difference obsession but completely ripped out of its foundations as a liberatory project², we need only to think of the US vice president J. D. Vance's suggestion that a key moral commitment of the modern Christian is to love your family, neighborhood, community, and fellow citizens, and then (maybe, just maybe, I might add) you love 'the rest of the world.'³ Relations are always-already ordered.

Speaking of kin and the otherwise, the question of difference is also a key generative force in the anthropological iterations of queer theory. As Margot Weiss (2016) writes, queer theory emerged as an invitation to think differently about identity and later about abundant connections between sexuality and power, leading us to consider what it would mean if we were ready to care about relations, whether they are relationally 'close' to us as individuals or not (Weiss, 2024). In other words, I suggest that while making difference visible is immensely important for examining otherwise hidden power structures (also in writing), a preoccupation with difference might also produce the reverse effect: namely, a distrust and reproduction

of inequality, a focus on solidarity only with those who share certain performative virtues, based on reinforcing that difference—especially in terms of identity and positionality. This has implications for questions about indifference in anthropological research practice, research ethics, and how we, as anthropologists, view ‘the field’ itself.

Indifference can point to many ways of being in and valuing the world, one of them being to not care about anything. Another kind of indifference may lie in being vile and sustaining racist indifference to the suffering of others within one’s affective space, as Ghassan Hage (2026 [2024]) argued in his reading of *The Zone of Interest*, a film depicting the actively habituated racism of a German family living next to the extermination camp in Auschwitz. But in this article, the point of departure is indifference as it is developed in Naisargi N. Davé’s (2023) *Indifference: On the Praxis of Interspecies Being*. Davé (2023, pp. 36–37) invites us to think of indifference not as apathy or moral detachment, nor as a super-human ability to be consistently altruistic with every being, but as a refusal of the humanist obsession with making differences—between people, between humans and animals, between cultural contexts—and to value the opacities and silences that indifference entails. In this invitation to be indifferent also lies an invitation to be less curious, if by curious we mean poking and prying into every detail of the unknown in other beings.

With playful indifference, then, we are interested in the space that emerges when we both attune ourselves to how we might be together in ways that are not defined by external criteria, and yet we are very conscious of the difference that these criteria make. In this sense, being playfully indifferent means being intensely present with each other in a moment of feeling like we might be surprised. Playful indifference describes a sense that everything we do together could matter more than everything that wants to hurt us, even if only temporarily. Can we be playfully indifferent all the time? Maybe not. *Should* we be? This article gestures toward a yes. Now let us return to sitting down with Miriam.

Notebooks

As we play with the format of the research article, this text should also have a methods section explaining the research project, its central questions, and the methods used to provide insights into them. Let us begin with a black Moleskine notebook and turn to another moment of Miriam and I spending time together in 2018. After making ourselves a cup of tea, and after Miriam and I had picked up perfectly sweet medjoul dates from a bowl in front of where we found our way to the dedicated *majlis* on an embroidered red, green, black, and white patterned mattress on the floor, I sat as a ‘good student,’ as Miriam would teasingly call me, with my notebook and pen ready to scribble down thoughts, utterances, and things to remember in general. She looked at the notebook and told me that her father, too, had always kept meticulous

notebooks to track his everyday life and business. Now, the notebooks no longer made sense to the person who had originally filled them with words and numbers. She pondered that they had even been quite a distraction from what really mattered, in the sense that they had kept her father from being attuned to everything that happened in-between taking notes and keeping track: the family's wellbeing, the wife, the children and their desires to become something other than what was expected or had been offered to them by virtue of the family name. I told her about my own father, a teacher, who had been so invested in the children at the public school where he was teaching, that as a child I had no doubt he loved the children there more than his own. Because our conversations made great use of reflections on our own points of view, I sensed that, by telling the story about her father, Miriam was hinting at me and my attachment to my black notebook. As part of the formalized genre of learning that is 'ethnographic fieldwork,' I had learned to organize conversations, data, observations, and even my own emotional responses in the field. Even if it was not entirely intentional on her part, she made me reflect on the notebook as an analytical device. Be present, she seemed to tell me, knowing that the notebook—not unlike her father's—was important for my business: the practice of doing anthropology.

Miriam and I met many times over the months I spent in Amman, and we still continue our conversations now, at the time of writing this article. Her reflections have always made me see in a different light what I might be able to do. They have enabled me to sense the horizon of what should matter most, ethically as well as politically, even when I failed to live according to her advice consistently. The punctuated relations in which fieldwork often results clearly showed how our ideas of living our lives, ideas that once stood as certainties, changed over time. Perhaps as part of this punctuated relationality, our conversations also gradually became more about our own method of thinking together. They created time for us to witness what might become through that relation.

Miriam and many others I have worked with through the years in Amman stayed with me. In my imagination (and often via text messages and emails), they continued to look over my shoulder as I formulated a project after the PhD: a phenomenology of in-between spaces for playful reparation.⁴ And so, through these iterations of, firstly, the arts of living queerly and then, secondly, the phenomenology of playfulness in artistic and activist praxis in Amman, Jordan, we arrive once again at the relationship between trust, (the fear of) difference, and the suggestion to consider playful indifference as a way of staying-in-relation throughout it all.

What eventually became part of my later research was a method of inquiry that took the form of a workshop called 'In-between spaces for playful reparation.' The project came to life in the early months of the genocidal war in Gaza, and many Ammanis were angry, tormented, and full of despair, exhaustedly telling me that they saw no meaning in what they had been doing before the war. What difference does my art make during a genocide? None, most would say. Faced with how little difference my own

research made, too, I invited people, artists, academics, people I knew and people I did not know, to join in for a few hours of drawing, storytelling, and playing with objects. We got together first in Amman, then in Aarhus, Denmark, then in Montréal and Toronto, Canada. What I hoped for was for us to hold space a bit longer, to see what might emerge. In retrospect, I think I hoped that we would be able to create momentary encounters in which life itself unfolded, despite the political status quo seemingly being the same, or perhaps regressing to something even more authoritarian (see also Davé, 2023, pp. 36–37).

This brings me back to my concern with *playful indifference* as a way in which we might conceptualize the ethics of creating more space to be in relation without focusing on either sameness or difference as key generative force, ethically speaking. To do this, I want to take up Davé's (2023) concept of indifference as a virtue worth cultivating in the world and introduce a reading of feminist philosopher Maria Lugones's (1987) essay on playfulness, world-travelling, and loving perception. With this, I invite you to consider how we might think about playful indifference as a matter of experiencing and pursuing affective intensity, containing within it the possibility of becoming otherwise (Povinelli, 2012) in the face of multiple moralizing and difference-making agendas. While this might at first sound conceptually vague, esoteric even, it resonates with a perspective shared in a personal conversation by Ra'ed Ibrahim, a well-known artist from Amman. Art is pointless right now, he told me. Yet, we have to keep creating. We have to keep living.

Playful indifference in the minor key.

Indifference as virtue

Indifference and queer possibility are a key focus for Madhavi Menon (2015) in *Queer Universalism*, in which Menon argues for a universalist approach to the fluid nature of our being-in-common. The point of departure here lies in Michel Foucault's criticism of the oppressive potentialities of liberal identity politics that have turned desire into a matter of individual rights and legal recognition. With Menon, we can read indifference as a queer political and ethical virtue and practice, as an alternative to liberal queer identity politics. Menon's suggestion that 'queer' cannot be contained within any imagined borders offers an alternative to an unplayful relation to difference. As Menon (2015) writes:

'<...> what's queer about queer theory is its ability to recognize and sympathize with longings across borders, to refuse the logic of particularity in relation to desire; to keep the door universally open rather than shutting it behind our backs; to think of desire as that which moves across rather than being confined to sexual acts and identities' (p. 127).

Being moved by relating to queerness is nothing new to the artists and activists I have worked with in Amman over the past decade (see Odgaard,

2021; 2022). These are people who have worked to make space for visible gender and sexual expressions that the community feels called to comment on, and that at different points in time have been confronted with moral panic around said expressions. This happened most recently in 2023 when a large-scale crackdown facilitated by the General Intelligence Agency took place against the queer community in Amman. Two activists were detained and one outed to his family, whereafter both purportedly left the country.⁵ While media and human rights organizations were quick in making this visible, they also contributed to the dominant perception in Jordan that queer people are foreign to the values and morals of the nation state. These same artists and activists are people who engage in neighborhood, family, and friendship negotiations, disregarding the differences that might keep people apart. These are ways of relating and engaging experimentally and playfully with the world that often escape larger stories about a particular place, including moral narratives. As a result, this paper is at the same time a reflection on playful indifference as an ethics of relation in anthropology, on playful indifference in the field, and on playful indifference in singular everyday encounters.

Returning to Miriam and the moment I walked out her door in 2021: at that time, her simple utterance 'I trust you' felt like a blow, like something already painfully solidified. But having regained my breath, I want to dwell on another door that Miriam opened in that moment, the door to thinking otherwise (Povinelli, 2012) about what mattered in the situation. This leads me to consider playful indifference within a hyper-engaged field such as the one I have been working in over the past decade. I explore how the focus on difference—between people, groups, and contexts—risks reducing the possibility for trusting relations and solidarities in broader social spaces, and risks inhibiting our ability to realize our shared precariousness in the world as we have come to know it (Lugones, 1987; Strathern, 2020).

While Davé focuses on what indifference to difference might offer in relation to the non-human world and to interspecies relations, especially through her extensive work on animal activism and activists in India, I take up her concept as one that invites us to be attentive to moments where encounters with other beings allow us to be touched by and drawn towards being less certain, rather than more certain of ourselves and the world around us. Davé's thinking around indifference is tied to an interest in ethics as immanent and therefore not pre-determined by the political in fields that are otherwise highly politicized. I take up her insights to reflect on playful indifference as a kind of practice that is connected to equally politicized fields, where it is of importance to insist on creating space to play and to be in playful relationships with one another. This, I propose, can be an alternative to an approach that centers identity-difference, particularly for those of us who study activism or activists across various global contexts. And so, I am especially interested in the kinds of relations where a broader sense of indifference—as an ethical virtue achieved through the experience of playfulness—can emerge. At the same time, I remain aware that the

emergence of such relations is often foreclosed by competing interests and constraints, and that therefore what we are looking at might not always be ethical virtue, but rather a momentary experience of the possibility of indifference through playfulness. As Miriam reminded me when she pointed to my notebooks, it is important to be present in the relation, rather than focusing on the pre-established or hindsight contextualization (academic or otherwise) one might make of it. Being intensely present in the relation and what unfolds in it leads us to what comes before indifference: playfulness.

Eye-to-eye

When considering playfulness as an opening unto solidarities otherwise, I draw inspiration from the feminist philosopher María Lugones (1987). In the essay 'Playfulness, "world"-travelling and loving perception,' Lugones is looking for ways in which an arrogant perception of others and unwillingness to travel to the other's world can be met with women of color's loving perception of other world-travelers 'like' them. Being open to travel lovingly to the other's world, Lugones (1987, p. 15) argues, is also a matter of playfulness, given that this entails being open to the other's full subjectivity. I will add my own reading here, of trusting the relation enough to be open to the abundant possibilities it affords, and by allowing time to become its own creature in the process. The openness to becoming otherwise, thus, will not end, even if the structural conditions do. Lugones frames this understanding of play in opposition to mastery, competition, and dominance. As an openness to becoming otherwise: '<...> we have not abandoned ourselves to, nor are we stuck in, any particular "world." We are there creatively. We are not passive' (Lugones, 1987, pp. 16–17). For Lugones, the possibilities for world-traveling and playfulness are partly made with reference to identity and, importantly, identity in relation to feminist Latina coalition-making. As Lugones sets out to find the theoretical means to think through her experience of playfulness as a way of travelling between worlds, she encounters Johan Huizinga's (1950) *Homo Ludens* and Hans-Georg Gadamer's thoughts on play and playfulness and, to her dismay, realizes that if their perception of play is right, hers must be utterly wrong. To play the game, as she reads Huizinga, you must first know the rules and how to play by them. You must apply this knowledge better than your competitor in the match. Huizinga's argument, that play creates culture (in Lugones's reading), thus means that through this way of conceptualizing play, we see a culture of Western imperialism emerge, one that engages with others in a competitive way. The kind of play that Lugones is interested in is the kind of play that allows us to be playfully in relation without any pre-established reference to who we might become together when we play; we are in it only for the sake of being together and for witnessing what might unfold as we throw rocks in the river and watch them crack open, revealing beauty inside. Lugones's argument is epistemological, existential, and ontological at the same time (Ortega, 2016, p. 102). Yet, as one tries to grasp the concreteness of relations for playfulness,

there is a risk that it might slip one's grasp, partly because Lugones turns to generalized identity-terms such as 'servant,' 'mother,' 'daughter,' and 'Latina' vs. 'white Western feminist,' not unlike those who preoccupied me as I was navel-gazing while writing my dissertation as a white, cis-gendered woman (see also Mulaj, 2024, p. 23). A ground that separates an individual from the world, too, and that only allows for a world to emerge between two separate individuals (see also Strathern, 2020). This to say that, along with Davé, I do not find the focus on identity very productive for traveling to other worlds without being stuck in one's own positionality. Rather, I suggest being indifferent in the sense of wanting to be in relation *without seeking to do something to or with the other*. It means to act without the fear-based hesitancy that arises from the constant worry that we might harm—or be harmed by—the other due to solid notions of identity-based difference. It also means that moral virtues are there to be challenged and put at risk all the time. It is, in other words, also about an ethics of being in relation and an 'openness to surprise' (Lugones, 1987, p. 16), without any promise as to the result of that surprise. Surprises come with risk. Through them, we might get jolted out of what we perceive to be our own skin.

In the example above and in leaving Miriam's house, I had become too invested in the difference that difference makes. In my academic pursuit of a PhD project, I had become too obsessed with the paranoid reading of relations and of their possibilities. This was a reading of suspicion and adherence to rules, rather than playful creation and relation-building, which made it difficult for me to allow Miriam to trust that I could tell a good-enough story (Scheper-Hughes, 1992, p. 28; see also Cohen, 1998, p. xxiii) about her life and the lives of others in Amman. This story would have to be about what their lives might reveal about queerness, art, and activism in Jordan, and I became better at letting go of rules in the process of doing fieldwork and writing stories in a less paranoid way (see also Georgis, 2013). This is a neat reading, but what I want to suggest is that the juxtaposition between adherence and the absence of rules might be part of the issue. When Miriam said to me 'I trust you,' this was not blind trust. It did not mean there were no rules to be considered. It was rather: 'I know the rules and although they look different for me than for you, right now, we see eye-to-eye and we play.'

Furthermore, the *possibility* of playful indifference was already there before this *reflection* on playful indifference and before our ways of telling stories about others came to paper. In many ways, it had been present all along: in the work of artists and activists who insisted on making space for leisure, performance, and play under challenging circumstances. I will offer one example through conversations in the early days of a queer art space in Amman (in what follows, I will refer to it as 'Artspace'). The early days at the Artspace, which was welcoming to queer people, provided instances in which it became clear to me how intertwined experiences of difference, safety, and risk were with the activist practices responding to a capitalist system of accumulating difference through 'new' social initiatives, coupled with moral notions of danger and security. In the last part of the text, I will (re)turn to

reflect on what indifference might mean for anthropological research practice in such a context. As part of that reflection, I will consider some of the risks associated with adopting an indifferent stance toward certain structures or powers, both in this ethnographic account and in anthropology more broadly.

A safe space for difference?

In the years 2018—2019 and during fieldwork for my PhD dissertation, I spent many days and nights at the Artspace in Amman. There, people had been discussing what it means to create a 'safe space' through consent, and whether the concept of safety was even useful or appropriate. Someone pointed out to one of the organizers that calling something a 'safe space' implied that it saw itself in contrast with the surrounding society—an idea they strongly opposed. People criticized that this was a Western conceptualization of the relationship between public and private spaces. The Artspace was located on a relatively quiet street in one of Amman's older neighborhoods, with birds chirping from nearby houses and a small garden in the front. On sunny days, light would stream in soft beams through the windows, and unless the curtains were drawn, the main gathering room would be bathed in a warm glow, casting long, soft shadows across the newly painted, white walls.

At the time of the safe space discussion, the center had just opened its doors to young Ammanis interested in exploring art, activism, gender, and the body. The walls were mostly bare, save for a few shelves. But this quickly changed. As people began to spend time there, so too did the things they brought with them: books appeared on the shelves; plants decorated the floors and walls; and soon, the space held empty teacups, half-eaten bags of salty snacks, soda cans, overflowing ashtrays, dry pita bread from shared meals, and numerous trash bags waiting to be taken out.

In the discussions about creating a safe space, facilitators voiced a range of passionate perspectives. While opinions were shared, actions and resolutions seemed to linger unresolved. Some of those in opposition to the idea were of the older generation of artists and activists in the city, and perhaps the observation came from experiences with what marking a space as safe for queer people might produce: nosy curiosity, fear, or even a fuel for what Stanley Cohen (2011) originally called 'moral panic' (see also Mahadeen, 2021). The critique of some of the facilitators and friends that disagreed with framing the Artspace as a safe space was that invoking safety marked the space as fundamentally different from the outside world. Did this notion rely on a Western division between public and private? Between 'us' and 'them'? Could one instead be indifferent to the difference being imposed by certain others in society? Or was that all just one big theoretical exercise disregarding the actual work being done and those doing the actual work and feeling a need for safety? In the years that followed, intimate stories of trauma, new friendships, conflict, and disagreement continued to rise and expand at the Artspace. Having a space that was open to those who would

contain these stories and take part in listening to them was important. It was especially important because it allowed some people to spend time outside the family home, where most live until they are married, and if they are not married, potentially without any change in sight. The Artspace was one space in a line of spaces in the city that were open to the artistic community. Several spaces, including another well-known space hosting artists from the region, had ended up being forced to close their doors due to overt or covert pressure from influential people in the community.

One activist told me that safety should be the feeling that emerged in the space itself, in a situation of people experimenting together. She argued that referring to something as safe for specific identities reinforced the idea that private spaces needed to shelter people from a hostile public—an idea rooted in Western ways of thinking about difference, particularly in terms of the legal recognition that marginalized communities needed higher levels of protection than the normalized 'majority.' This concept of safe space also contains the idea that thinking about difference reinforces the understanding that only through making something else, something new and distinct from that which already is, can the freedom to become otherwise emerge.

This was at least my interpretation of the discussion, as recounted by facilitators with different views on the matter. But as with so many other conversations in the space, practical tasks soon took over. These were of immediate importance in a space that had only just been furnished with dishes, simple furniture, a stove, and an electric kettle used to boil water to pour over pouches of black *al-Ghazaleen* or *Zourat Shami* herbal tea that is ubiquitous in Jordan. Over the months I spent there, there were periods in which it felt as if life simply took over, life as in immanence, the emergence of relations in a space of possibility, and the messy and playful unfolding of life in all its vitality and with all its drama. In between all of this, the space hosted informal discussions, impromptu parties, exhibitions, workshops, group sessions, and meetings with people from the 'outside,' including potential funders. Funder and donor meetings meant that life had to be tucked away, neatly organized into documents and verbal pitches. I perceived that during this time, police and neighborhood surveillance of the space started to increase.

No signs

'Language is not for us,' one of the main facilitators, Shams, said during an online follow-up conversation a couple of years after the opening of the Artspace. The sentence stuck with me. *Language is not for us?* It seemed that they, too, had grown wary of how naming something can pin it down—fix it in place, and of how this was an active part of the politics surrounding the Artspace. This kind of language was not for them because it had become a structure of possibility for someone other than them. It was a structure of possibility that included compiling documents about the space's facilitators

at a local politician's desk, perhaps also sending them intimidating messages. When I first arrived at the Artspace in 2018, there was no signage indicating the space's presence. There was no label or marker outside the door, apart from the garden gate that indicated an entrance. There was no name for the space at that point in time, even though what happened there was often extraordinary. At the same time, discussions about whether to label it 'safe' had already begun.

The framings that would come to define the space as different from its surroundings had not yet been established. The space had not yet become 'visible' to the outside world. But that was soon to change, one reason being the need to seek and sustain funding. How do you seek funding for a place that does not define itself as different from what already exists? A place that does not present itself as an organization, institution, or even an initiative, and hence does not partake in an accumulation of difference-making? And so, in the months that followed, the space gradually took on a more formal identity, becoming something defined by its difference from the surrounding society. And I, too, became increasingly allergic to language: to my own language, to the anger expressed in social media commentaries suggesting all of the worst imaginable punishments for queer individuals, to the formal language that would ensure that my words were accepted in the academic community. *Language is not for me, either.* A writer's block was pending on my end, because, faced with all this, writing felt anything but playful for a very long time.

Doors closing

When I returned to Amman in 2021 and paid a short visit to the Artspace, much had changed. Many people had come through its doors over the years, and their artworks still hung around the space as quiet testaments to the time spent there. A painting of a young woman and a group of elderly men wearing keffiyeh stood out to me. The walls seemed to absorb and reflect the emotional energy poured into those pieces. As one facilitator said about each new group that formed there, 'It's like magic.'

But something else caught my attention as I entered: the sudden presence of surveillance cameras and locks, both outside and inside the building. During my initial fieldwork in 2018, these hadn't been there. Back then, the space emanated a feeling of warmth, friendly and slightly nostalgic. Now, the cameras and padlocks marked a shift. Like the rejection of language, they also stuck with me. I learned that the space was likely closing, at least the physical space. Artworks were stacked in corners and still adorned the walls of the main room where we were sitting together. Around the room, new signs had been posted: reminders about non-discrimination, intersectionality, and consent. Intimate care products were readily available in the bathroom. But due to growing external pressure by security agents, the plan was now to dissolve the space's physical form and merge it with other venues to make

it more appealing to a broader audience, or perhaps to deflect speculation about what happened behind closed doors. Or so I understood, over tea and lemon muffins and the warmth of reunion.

Less than a year later, I received news that the space had been closed. For the Jordanian authorities, the fact that it had claimed a difference and that the Artspace had visibly made room for something the authorities were uncertain of, seemed enough to warrant suspicion, surveillance, and a desire for repression. Any hope for opacity was effectively erased, and where the Artspace used to be is now a regular apartment, without a physical trace of what it once was, at least not a trace that I could find.

Trust in (in)difference

And so, let us return to why I began this article with trust and indifference.

Miriam's 'I trust you' was, I think, a way to disregard the difference between us without naïveté. She could have emphasized this difference, for she was fully aware of it. It could have prompted her suspicion: I was, and I am, after all, a Western, white researcher from the 'lilliput nation' with an inflated sense of importance, Denmark. But in that moment, she chose to disregard these differences and look me in the eye. She decided to trust our relationship and choose it over the structures that would otherwise divide us. These structures could, in a sense, also be mobilized through language: Western, white, academic scholar, straight-performing, cis-gendered, and so on. These attributions were offering me theoretical cover, allowing me to defer or displace my own responsibility in our relationship and in relation to the many others we both knew.

To say 'I trust you,' then, was Miriam's way to affirm the potential of our concrete relation, rather than defaulting to the abstract categories that might explain away, reiterate, or excuse our differences. That trust pulled me away from the comforts of theory and back into relation. Davé (2023, p. 8) writes: 'My understanding of indifference is relational: of mutually existing in difference rather than being different beings seeking to grasp, gaze, admire, and master the difference of others.' This perception of indifference as a relational virtue stands in stark contrast to the closure of spaces like the Artspace, spaces seen as threats precisely because of their visible difference from power's dominant view of what Jordanian society 'is.' It also offers a critique of the tendency—within activism and beyond—to insist on safe spaces that are defined through the making of difference between groups. This critique stands irrespective of however sympathetic and humble one is with regard to why these practices of trying to make safe and secure spaces exist in the first place.

Miriam's utterance echoed this alternative logic: she trusted our relation, the mutual regard it held, and the promise that this was possible through trust. To my understanding, she suggested something akin to the following: we exist in difference, and I trust that our relationship will allow us to continue doing so—with care. And that, too, is something I can trust.

I trust, furthermore, that there is value in cultivating this kind of indifference to difference: through relationships that rest on being together and being moved by each other regardless of whether we identify with each other, whether we are part of the same community, or not (see also Menon, 2015; Davé, 2023).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, it should be noted that I am not interested in passing judgment on the various ways people navigate and maintain activist spaces: often through making their marginalization visible, even when this carries very real risks that are much more than a matter of academic abstraction. The issue is not that we are not different. The issue, as Davé's work and this article suggest, is the preoccupation with difference that makes people view others as threats. That casts them as needing to be changed, assimilated, or explained using already existing terms. Or, conversely, that fixes them in their difference, denying their—as well as one's own—ability to become something else entirely. Indifference to difference, in this sense, means prioritizing relationship over positionality; it allows for the possibility of playfulness as a central way of being in the world with others. To see what might emerge, to sense it intensely when it does. To allow things, people, and spaces to remain somewhat opaque even to the academic reader. Not without acknowledging the political stakes at play, not as a liberal experiment of visibility for the sake of visibility, but as an expression of political possibility and a need for spaces to play with the promise of the opaque, obscure, and surprising in all of us. That is what Miriam taught me the day I closed the door to her home—but not to our relationship. It is also what keeps me coming back. And it may also be the difficult, perhaps impossible, lesson offered by the Artspace after it was closed by authorities, who found its difference-making intolerable, desiring for that very difference to be made a problem, then transparent, and then obliterated. They refused to be indifferent to it.

1. Pseudonym.
2. Originally developed by the Combahee River collective in the 1970s (see also Bredenböcker, 2022).
3. Vance stated this in an interview with Fox News in January 2025. The full interview is available at <https://www.foxnews.com/video/6367976414112> at the time of writing (accessed on 19 March 2026).
4. The Carlsberg Foundation sponsored a project that allowed me to work with Naisargi Davé, Dina Georgis, and many other wonderful colleagues at the University of Toronto.
5. It made it to international news that LGBTQ communities were being targeted deliberately by the security apparatus. See *The Guardian's* reporting, for example, Christou, 2023.

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