On the Borderzone: Toronto's Diasporic Queer Muslims

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores notions of the reconfiguration of “home” and “exile” in the experience of Salaam, the Muslim Queer Community in Toronto. Based on fieldwork that took place from 2004 to 2006, I examine diasporic practices and narratives of belonging to homes in exile. A main argument of this thesis is that queer Muslims’ notions of ‘home’ are understood through the experience of ‘exile’ and vice-versa. Their positioning as diasporic queer Muslims situates them on the borderzone of the larger Muslim and queer communities in Canada. By queering Islam and Islamizing queer identity, Salaam produces a third space that is located on the borderzone of queer spaces and Muslim spaces. I conclude that arrivals to ‘homes’ are always in the process of realization and experiences of exile are constantly shifting.
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Departure: A Reflexive Introduction

My move from a Northern Palestinian village to the city of Jerusalem was not a transition from an Arab conservative village to the city of red light zones, sex shops or “out” queer life. It was a move from a space of familiarity to a city of impossible paradoxes, of radical religiosity and secularism, from institutionalized politics to anarchism, from Mosques, churches, and synagogues to bars, clubs and underground queer life. Jerusalem is a city where borders between Arabs and Jews are marked by Israeli checkpoints and walls, and a city where Jews always meet Arabs in different, inevitable and sometimes violent encounters. In the city of paradoxes I found my desires.

The transition from the ‘Northern Arab village’ to the ‘big city’ was a transition from my wishes to their accomplishments. I was ‘out of the closet’ to many people in Jerusalem, and ‘in the closet’ in my own village: ‘out’ where no one knows me and ‘in’ where everyone claims to know everything about me. In East Jerusalem (the Palestinian side) I was mistaken to be either a boy or a Spanish tourist, and in West Jerusalem (the Israeli side) I was sometimes harassed by Israeli soldiers who suspected me of being a security threat, and I was thus occasionally stopped for ID checks. My in-between look, not a typical Arab (religious) woman, confused both sides differently. I continued to move and to transfer myself from one socio-political space to another. My contentious movements from one space to another made me think about my positioning as queer in each space in which I was located. The idea, then, of researching the relations between
moving amidst social, political and geographical spaces and the question of queer positioning took shape precisely when I decided to take my movements one step further. I applied for Anthropology programmes at some graduate schools in Canada. Eventually I was accepted and I decided to leave – embarking on yet another social, political and geographical transition.

From my room in Jerusalem I imagined my transfer or displacement and I wondered how I would relate to my own homeland when I would be away in another country. Would I romanticize my reality in a Palestine that is difficult to live in socially and politically? Would I miss the ‘semi-closeted’ life I had in my ‘home’? Would I relocate and resituate a large part of myself and identity, in this case my queerness, in the new reality of displacement or will I always feel displaced and homeless? From this standpoint I wanted to research queers’ positioning, as shaped by migration and diaspora, through the lens of my own experience.

The last week of my departure I was preoccupied with family visits, and I had people whom I did not know very well visiting me and wishing me good luck with my life and education in Canada. My maternal grandmother told me in a joking tone: “So you will be an American now?” Others were telling me to find a ‘good’ Christian Canadian man to bring home for marriage; some asked if I ever wish to return; and others, especially the young people, would advise me not to return at all given the political, economic and social conditions that exist in our region.

As an Arab and as a Palestinian, the experience of moving and migrating is not unusual. Within the last sixty years (or even further back in history) Palestinians have
gone through numerous displacements as a result of the formation of the state of Israel in 1948, and the 1967 occupation of West Bank and Gaza Strip, and have been denied the right of return by Israel. Thus, in Arabic we have common-place words to express different realities of displacement. These can be traced through the Arabic literature and debates on ‘exiles’ and ‘alienation’ or the experience of living outside one’s own homeland. The concepts of al-mahjar (المهاجر) and al-ghorbah (الغرب) form a central experience of many Palestinians (and Arabs in general).

Al-mahjar in Arabic means ‘the place or the country of immigration’. It is usually used to describe the ‘destiny of immigration’ and is always related to the idea of living in the ‘West’. This is not to suggest that al-mahjar means the ‘West’, but it implies the social positioning of being strange in an alien country or society (so a Lebanese living in Egypt is not considered to be living in al-mahjar). Al-mahjar is also related to the concept of al-ghorbah which literally means ‘living in an alienated space’. The root of the word al-ghorbah is gharb (غرب), which literally means ‘West’. As a verb, tagharaba (تغرب) means to be alienated, especially in the ‘West’ (i.e. Europe and the Americas). Another interesting etymological connection in these words’ linkages to other concepts is the relation between the meaning of the word queer in Arabic and the Arabic word ghareeb (غرير) (that shares the same root as al-ghorbah), which means ‘a stranger’. The common translation for the word ‘queer’ in Arabic is ‘ghareeb al-attwar’ (الأطرار) a person who is strange or odd in personality, which refers to the original

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meaning of the word (i.e. odd or strange)\(^3\) and which is widely used to refer to someone who is sexually *shaath* (شَتَث) or sexually ‘abnormal’ in English\(^4\). The words stranger or *ghareeb* and the experiences of *ghorbah* are related at least at the level of language and discourse which sparks in my mind the ‘structural’, or even originary, links between being queer and being alienated and exiled (or even Westernized).

Rauda Morcus, one of the most well known Palestinian queer activists and poets in Palestine (and Israel), writes about her experiences of displacement through living as a Palestinian queer woman in Israel. Her complex positioning and identifications displace her in most situations in which she finds herself. Her poem *Departure* (**رحيل** (رحيل)) manifests her positioning as already an outsider in her home village in part because of her queer identity, and as an outsider Palestinian living in the Israeli city of Tel-Aviv. The poem (2003) was originally written in Arabic\(^5\):

\[
\text{سارحل مدينة، بيت سقف وسرير}\\
\text{سارحل أنا مكان أو حتى حياة}\\
\text{مهمجة أنا داخل أرضي وبلادي}\\
\text{سجينة أنا داخل بيتني، أرضي وبلادي}\\
\text{سارحل مدينة ومكان}\\
\text{لأول مرة في حياتي رحيل}\\
\text{أحد عليك تل-أبيب}
\]

\(^3\) Recently, some Queer Middle-Eastern organizations have introduced a new translation of the word queer that incorporate the meaning LGBT community. The new translation of queer in Arabic is أحرار الجنس literally translates in English as “sexually liberated people” or “people who are free in their sexuality” (http://aswatgroup.org/arabic/gallery.php?category=58).

\(^4\) What is socially considered as ‘natural’ (hetero) sexual behaviour in many Arab societies is an indicator for healthy personality, while ‘homosexuality’ is viewed as an indicator of psychological, social and religious deviance.

\(^5\) http://www.aswatgroup.org/english/gallery.php?article=43
مظاهرة، فلسطينية، شاعرة وناشطة
مدينة حاضرة أناس رحيلتكم
مهجرة أنا داخل أرضي وبيتي
غير قانونية أنا في كل مكان
بدون هوية مكان أو حتى قصيدة

Departing a city, a house, a bed, a roof
Departing I am, a place or even a life
Displaced I am inside my country, my land
A prisoner I am inside my home, my land
Departing a city, a place
For the first time in my life, departure
Mourning you Tel-Aviv... the city of my maturation
A child, a girl, a woman I was in a village
Violence, aggression all that my body knew
A girl, a student, a woman I was here
Lesbian, feminist and a victim, I remember
In Tel-Aviv
suicide
Lesbian, Palestinian, poet and a lover
The city of my presence I am leaving you
I am displaced in my land, and my home
Illegal in every place
Even my identity does not exist
Without "status" or poems

In her poem, Morcus, as a Palestinian lesbian activist, marks this transition from her village to the city of Tel-Aviv. She marks her transforming identification from a victimized woman in the village who experienced violence and aggression, to a Palestinian lesbian feminist, and a victim of depression in a hostile environment in an Israeli city. Her transition to a strange space enables her politics to flourish and her queer identity to be highlighted after being oppressed in the village. In the city she was emancipated sexually but lonely due to her racial and national identification, which lead her to attempt to commit suicide. Rauda then leaves the city and becomes a nomad who is illegal everywhere, with an identity that "does not exist".

The idea of movement in and out of my family home became significant to me through the travel from my family's village to the city of my desires, where I could practice my queer life without fearing my family. The way between the two spaces was a long journey of thinking about what identity and what role I should take when I arrived home: the good student who comes home or the troubled feminist who talks only about oppression. I definitely felt compromised in both spaces. Movement and identity inevitably became a large part of my life and an important element for my survival. I moved to get education, but I also moved to escape bordered cities and imprisoning
villages. So why do people move? And do their movements always imply freedom and emancipation? Why do queer people occasionally seek their sexuality somewhere other than their original “home” (Cant 1997 and Fortier 2001, 200) (especially those who live in extremely hetero-normative societies)? What happens to queers who move? Do they feel like me “imprisoned in my emancipation”? Or do they find their authentic emancipation in being strangers and lonely, but “out” (of the closet) somewhere far?

Since I was about to leave home for education in another country, and since I was interested in doing a research on Middle Eastern queers who leave their homes to live outside as openly queer, I decided to search for Arab or Middle Eastern queer groups in Canada. The only organized group I found was a Muslim group that uniquely embraced diverse ethnic and national groups under the umbrella of Islam and the Muslim identity. I found out about Salaam, a Muslim queer⁶ “community” in Toronto, while I was still in Jerusalem. By a simple Google search, I found their website, www.salaamcanada.org.

Salaam, Toronto’s Queer Muslim Community, was founded in 1991. The idea behind the formation of Salaam was to create a safe space for Muslim queers in the city. The group functions within multiple realms. It provides support for Muslim queer new immigrants or refugees and provides vital information regarding settlement in Canada. Salaam also is a space for queer Muslims who are believers, thus the community holds weekly prayers and celebrate Muslim holidays. Salaam’s vision, as stated in their

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⁶ I use the word ‘queer’ to describe Salaam since the organization defines itself as such. I discuss my use of the term in the first chapter.
website, is to build a community that is dedicated to social justice and that fights prejudice, racism, sexism, homophobia and Islamophobia.
Method: The Diasporic Queer Connection

A month after my arrival in Toronto in August 2004, Rauda Morcus came for a fundraising tour for the Palestinian queer women group “Aswat”\(^7\). As part of Aswat, I joined Rauda in her efforts to represent the group in different social circles in the city. Rauda told me that she had a meeting with Naser\(^8\), one of Salaam’s most public members, and she wanted me to join her. By then I knew that I was interested in studying such a group, so I joined her as part of my duties with Aswat but also out of personal research interests. On my first meeting I introduced myself and I expressed my interest to join the group’s email list and participate and volunteer with the organization.

A month later I was invited to Naser’s house, for an *Iftar* dinner, the break of the fast during the holy month of Ramadan. I attended the *Iftar* not as anthropologist, since I did not announce my interests in studying Salaam explicitly to the group, but as a Middle-Eastern diasporic queer. Before the break of the fast Naser invited everyone to pray, and when he saw me not reacting to the call, he approached me and asked me to join them so my first reaction was to proclaim: “But you know I am Christian.” Naser was surprised to learn this, since most Arabs in the Middle-East are Muslim and only a small minority are Christian. He replied welcomingly: “You know it does not matter really, come to pray!” And thus I found myself performing the Muslim *Salah*, or prayer for the first time. I felt I had to ‘out’ myself from the religious closet, that I had hid from them, and following their assumptions that I was a Muslim I feared that I would be

\(^7\) Aswat’s website: www.aswatgroup.org
\(^8\) All the names of Salaam members are pseudonyms.
treated differently if I was a Christian. Two years after, such a fear proved to be false, as I joined Salaam’s coordinating group and became an active part in events organizing and volunteering.

Finally, two months after being part of the group, and after coming out of the ‘religious closet’, I decided to come out of the ‘anthropological closet’. On the first collective Iftar I attended with the group, on November 2004, I confronted Naser and then the others in Salaam, revealing my intentions to be in Salaam not only as an activist but also as an anthropologist and observer. Their responses were overwhelming. All the members with whom I spoke agreed to my plane to research the group’s formation and mission, and its individual members’ life stories. When I approached Naser and asked him if I could do my Masters research on Salaam, his response was “sure you can” and he proudly continued “as you see, in this Iftar there were so many Jews and Christians who came to participate and support us.”

I conducted my research with Salaam from August 2005 to October 2006 using a number of different methods. First, I conducted participant observation, where I attended Salaam’s activities, both religious (such as Iftars during the month of Ramadan) and socio-cultural events (like parties and support groups). Most of the time, I participated with Salaam as an activist in the group and not merely as an outside observer. In that sense, I had a special position in which I could be an insider as one of the organizers and an outsider who could question and critique the group’s practices through a researcher’s eye. Throughout such participant observation I sought to live and witness Salaam’s formation and its construction of community and spaces of belonging. However being
both an insider (a Salaam activist) and an outsider (an anthropologist), resulted in some epistemological concerns. As a Salaam member I felt that I could not articulate critical questions I had such as issues of self-orientalization (i.e. Salaam’s internalization of hegemonic ideas and stereotypes on being queer, Muslim and diasporic) gender hierarchies or Salaam’s relation to the wider Muslim Canadian community, since I did not want to ‘influence’ the ‘field’. I felt that I could not criticize Salaam’s ideology or some of its practices because I did not want to be perceived as ‘the academic patronizer’. In a sense, Salaam’s members related to me mostly as an active member of the group rather than an external researcher. I was asked several times to co-facilitate the support group meetings or to participate in the general meetings, as claimed that they needed more women in their group. Being an Arab also was an important factor because they needed more Arabs or Middle-Easters members. I was also asked to join the coordinator group, and currently I am organizing a Salaam and Mirchi (South-Asian queer women and transpeople group) queer women’s gathering.

Second, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews\(^9\). In August 2005 I sent an email to the general Salaam listserv asking the members to be interviewed for research purposes. I also sent personal emails to some of the people in Salaam who already knew me well. I got responses from those with whom I had already become acquainted and who had become friends with me. During the period of August till October 2005 I

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\(^9\) Most of my interviewees were approximately between the ages of 27-45. I did not take note of their ages, as my interviews were not focusing on generational differences but rather on experiences of sexual identity, migration and movement. Most of these narratives revealed similar themes despite age differences. Nevertheless, age differences may be relevant and significant in relation to how individuals think about and define their sexuality as sexual subjectivities are impacted by socio-political and economic changes.
interviewed five women, five men and one female-to-male transsexual\textsuperscript{10}. In the interviews, I focused on gathering personal stories of movement and queer identification and insights regarding the reasons behind Salaam’s formation and its construction of a community and notions of “home”.

All interviews were conducted in English. Even though the Arab interviewees spoke Arabic fluently, they preferred to speak mostly in English, especially when referring to their sexual and queer positioning. Since most interviewees spoke English as second language, and since my English is not my mother tongue, there were some complications in transcribing their interviews. Transcribing stories and narratives can leave gaps in the representations of the experiences and narratives told. In several occasions throughout my transcription, I had to edit some of the sentences to prevent lack of clarity in the narrative, without modifying the content of the conversation or the narrative.

My final research method was to investigate the main trends and motifs in Salaam’s website, articles, publications and the general email group. Through these spaces, I could locate Salaam’s production and reproduction of discourses on the politics of identity, especially those articles and writings that reclaim a Muslim and queer identity.

\textsuperscript{10} All interviewees signed a consent form approved by Faculty of Graduate Studies, York University (see appendix).
Homes and Exiles: Queer Displacements and Replacements

How home and exile are conceptualized through the experiences of diasporic queers is the main question I investigate in this thesis. Stories of queer Muslims in Salaam are stories of social and geographical displacements, which bring up ideas and experiences of belonging and alienation. Many queer Muslims in Salaam have left their lives in their homelands to live an open life in Toronto. This does not necessarily imply being ‘out of the closet’, but creating a space of comfort and building spaces of belonging that mimic spaces of home they left behind, and relocating displaced sexual and queer identities in those new spaces. Drawing on Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2001, 2003) argument that queers’ notion of home is located in ‘destinies’ and not in ‘origins’, I attempt to show how in the case of diasporic Muslim queers (or generally speaking non-White diasporic queers) home is never fully located on either side, but in the gap between the two spaces and experiences.

Queer Muslims who migrate to Canada from different dominantly Muslim countries imagine their migration as a sexual emancipation where they can experience their queer life somewhere else away from their ‘homes’ since they are denied this identity in their own home(lands). Homes, thus, are experienced as exilic and the exile or the destiny of immigration (al-mahjar) is imagined as ‘home’ or as ‘origin’. After migrating to Toronto many queer Muslims experience racism and alienation from the
mainstream queer scene (i.e. Toronto's 'Gay Village' on Church Street) in the city\textsuperscript{11}, either because it is dominantly White-masculine and because it is capitalist/consumerist and individualistic. From the interviews I conducted with some members, I could sense their frustrations around not fully succeeding to be 'at home' in Toronto despite being "out" and at times living openly queer lives.

The interviewees always relate to their 'origins' back in their 'homelands' as home while also constructing and reconstructing their realities in Toronto as 'home'. Such processes and conditions redefine notions of 'homes' and 'exiles', distancing them from essentialist or authentic assumptions that always take homes to be those spaces which are origins, and exiles as those spaces outside of origins.

This thesis attempts to promote a new understanding of queer homes and exiles. The example of queer, I argue, deconstructs traditional understandings of homes and exiles, transforming them into a dialectical relationship. Thus, the concept of 'home' and 'exile' are not binary oppositions or contradictions; they are rather dialectical in the sense that one defines, contests and mutually transforms the other. Through this understanding, homes can be conceptualized in terms of exile or exiles can be conceptualized in terms of home. Or in other words, the experiences of diasporic queers manifest the fluidity and transformability of the two concepts, since for some queers, homes are not taken for granted to be attached to 'origins' or 'destinies', but are sometimes rather in between the two spaces, somewhere in borderline spaces.

\textsuperscript{11} I elaborate on that scene in chapter two and three.
Although it is tempting to deal with the complex issues of homosexuality in Islam and although it is highly important to discuss such issue, in this thesis I focus on the experience of Muslim queers in diasporic contexts. When I found out about Salaam and decided to research the community, I decided to purchase the Qur'an thinking that I would have to investigate homosexuality in the Qur'an and other Islamic teachings. However, to my surprise, the issue of homosexuality in Islam was not the focus of most of my interviews. Although I asked the question: “how do you feel being Muslim and queer”, the responses were usually critical of stereotypical assumption that ‘one cannot be Muslim and queer’. Indeed people in Salaam have their own different interpretations of the Qur’anic verses that deal with homosexuality, but they also cannot ignore the ontological fact that they exist as Muslim and queer and these two entities exist in their lives. Since most of the emphasis of my interviews was on experiences of alienation, racism, migration, home and exile and not merely on the work of interpreting Islam I decided not to make this a primary focus of this thesis.

The other issue that I avoided interrogating is the gender dynamics within Salaam. Queer communities are not necessary feminist in ideology or practice. Salaam indicates in its website that it is an organization that seeks to fight misogyny, yet it has always been predominantly a gay men’s organization that marginalized women’s participation or experiences. All women I talked with complained about the predominance of men in Salaam. A year after I joined Salaam, a new women and transpeople group was formed as a sub-division of Salaam and only recently has the group become active in holding events and being more visible. In my third chapter, I discuss both women’s and men’s queer
stories of arrivals and departures, and although I note the differences between women’s experiences and men’s experiences I do not theorise such differences or explore it on a larger scale. Gender differences are central to queer experiences, however my focus in this thesis is to trace queer notions of belonging, without getting into details about gender-related theories or issues of masculinity or femininity. I believe that the experiences of queer Muslim women are significantly different from queer Muslim men due to gender hierarchies, which I highlight in my third chapter, but I think that this issue could be the topic and the focus of a whole thesis. This thesis focuses primarily on Muslim queer’s experiences of migration and senses of attachment at the general level, and not specifically in relation to gender dynamics.

Salaam attempts to build spaces of ‘homes’ and belonging in a reality of ‘exile’. Through my observations with the community, I argue that Salaam creates a borderzone space located on the liminal line between the larger (White-Canadian) queer community and the larger Muslim community in Canada. Such a creation of homes on the borderzones is not taken for granted and in fact it is understood through the social positioning within which Salaam is located (or forced to be located). Muslim queers are not only queer and nor are they only Muslim, since their sense of identification is never singular. Salaam becomes this space where both positioning and identities are worked out through what I referred to as the dialectical process of Islamizing queer and queering Muslim identity.
The first chapter in this thesis, “Queering Diaspora, Dislocating Home and Exile”, explores notions of home and exile through the existing literature. It also investigates notions of queer diaspora in an attempt to theorize it and set a framework for further theorizations of queer notions of migration and movement. Chapter two, “Contextualizing Salaam: A Community on the Borderzone”, attempts to situate and contextualize Salaam within the queer scene in the city of Toronto and the Canadian Muslim community. My concern in this chapter is to scrutinize the two spaces, of Muslim and queer, and to theoretically “situate” Salaam in a political and theoretical context. I argue that Salaam as a community is located in a borderzone that it built for itself as a safe space, where it can create home-spaces that are free from homophobia or racism and that contain images and moments that resemble homes in homelands and that are hospitable to queerness. In the third chapter, “Muslim Diasporic Queer Positioning and the Configuration of Homes”, I present five narratives of diasporic queers in an attempt to draw links between sexual and queer identities with ideas of movement and migration. The first three stories I present are those of Salaam members who left their homes as adults to live outside their countries, seeking their own sexual and queer freedom. The other two stories are of those who were born here to immigrant families and lived most of their childhood in Canada. In both experiences I highlight four themes: (1) thoughts of departure, (2) ideas of exiles and fears of departure, (3) moments of arrival, (4) reconstructing belonging in the new reality of exile. In the fourth chapter, “Queering Islam: The Dialectics and Transformation of Queer and Religious Identity in Exile.”, I investigate Salaam’s project of creating spaces of belonging through what I refer to as
‘Islamizing queer’ identity and ‘queering Muslim’ identity. Through my fieldwork I present some of my observations on Salaam’s activities in an attempt to show how Salaam’s location on the borderline of the positioning of queer and Muslim brings into formation a dialectical relationship between queer and Islam, that attempts to conceptualize Islam in terms of queer and queer identity in relation to Islam. Both identifications conceptualize one another through, for example, Salaam’s practices of prayer and rereading of the Islamic texts. In this chapter, I also propose the impossibility of both fully arriving at homes and completely (re)constructing spaces of home in a reality of exile.

This thesis is an attempt to emphasize the importance of a multiplicity of identifications, positionings and locations of queer diasporic subjects. Queer as a social positioning is always on the move between arrivals and departures and, being as such, it forces social theory to take on board social, political, geographical and cultural (Khayatt 2002: 494-5) marginalizations and displacement, which form an originary and substantial experience that is not only confined to deconstruction and subversion of sex or sexuality, feminism or gender (Marcus 2005:196,200 and Hennessy 1993:967,971-2). Queers are sometimes nomads, materially and symbolically. They are constantly displaced and replaced, dislocated and relocated in exiles and at homes at one and at the same time.
CHAPTER ONE

Queering Diaspora, Dislocating Home and Exile

Alya, a male to female transexual, escaped Turkey to Sweden, where she lived for approximately eight years and then from Sweden she came to Canada as a refugee escaping the threats of being killed by her family for being a transsexual. I met Alya on the first *Iftar*, in October 2004, during the holy month of Ramadan. Alya told me briefly about her long journey to Canada and how she could not sustain a legal status in Sweden so she had to leave for Canada. She had not visited Turkey for almost twelve years since, as she told me, her family and the people there never accepted her transition. Her life in Canada is difficult and somewhat sad, as she describes it. She repeated to me several times that Sweden is a better country and that she does not like her life in Canada since she cannot find a job or make a decent living. At the November 2006 *Iftar* that Salaam held in the 519 Church Street, QLGBT community\(^\text{12}\) centre, I met Alya again and she told me that she had finally visited Turkey. When I asked her how the visit was, she replied that people were more accepting of her appearance and her new ‘look’ after the sexual transition, now that she looks like a ‘real’ woman. She told me that she had a good time and that before the visit she could not even think of visiting her family and that she hated Turkey and did not miss anyone at all. Alya’s story is one story of queer Muslims in Toronto, and in Salaam in particular. Her story amplifies many narratives of queer Muslims who came to Canada as refugees and now live in multiple spaces and locations.

\(^{12}\) QLGBT stands for Queer, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual or Transgender.
They live in exile with no option of a return back home, even though some of them wish to return. Here, in exile, they are engaged in a constant rebuilding of homes that resembles the ones they left behind, transforming their exile into a home and simultaneously their homes (back home) into exile. The result of this ongoing struggle of (re)placing a home that was displaced is a new conceptualization of homes. Salaam, then, as a community is an actualization of these aspects of home-space construction.

This chapter attempts to explore notions of “queer diaspora” and the dialectics of “home-exile”. In the first part, I develop a notion of queer diaspora marking the particularity of such diaspora in relation to gender and sexual identifications. In the second part, I review some case studies in anthropological literature that deal with queer migration and diaspora. In the third part, I develop a new understanding of experiences of “home” and “exile”, arguing for a queer dialectical conceptualization of the two concepts. What is “queer diaspora”? Is it a diaspora that is queer in its very nature, with all that the adjective “queer” might connote, out-of-order or marginalization, or is it a state of dispersal for people who are queer? Or should we envision a notion of “queer diaspora” that imagines a diaspora of the socially marginalized and a diaspora that does not assume a geographic origin or destiny?

The concept “diaspora” connotes a “connection between groups across different nation states whose commonality derives from an original but maybe removed homeland” (Anthias 1998:560). According to this definition, these connections bring into formation new reterritorialized identities that are centered on ethnicity or nationality. I
attempt to expand this understanding by proposing gender or sexuality as another basis upon which diaspora can be understood.

The term “diaspora” originated from Greek, meaning “scattering of seeds” (Anthias 1998:560), which implies an originary point of departure and other dispersed destinies or from a preoriginary center to scattered peripheries. Traditionally, the term was limited to populations that were forced into displacement, like the Jews, Armenians or the Palestinians; however, the term nowadays denotes “a social condition entailing a particular form of ‘consciousness’, which is particularly compatible with postmodernity and globalization (ibid)”. The experience of diaspora is of being “from one place and of another, and is identified with the idea of particular sentiments towards the homeland, whilst being formed by those of the place of settlement” (Anthias 1998:565). It is no longer a move from ‘a preoriginary center to scattered peripheries’ but from a constructed and imagined center to other forms of peripheral centers, or a displacement across time and space; it is a “range of positionings of Others in relation to the forces of domination and vis-à-vis other Others.” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:4).

Diaspora, as Tölölyan defines it, is concerned with the ways in which nations, imagined or real, are “fabulated, brought into being, made and unmade, in culture and politics, both in land people call their own and in exile” (Tölölyan 1991:3). Diaspora is not only a displacement or replacement but also considered to be “an alternative to the metaphysics of “race”, nation and bounded culture coded into the body” (Gilroy 2000:123). In supplementing race or nation, diaspora becomes a form of identity that people can embody and perform. Diasporic communities share collective identity (this is
not to suggest that they are homogenous) that is based on the shared experience (and memory) of displacement, a classical example of that is the Jewish diasporic identity which shaped to a large part by Jewish religion, labour, politics and kinship. Diaspora as identity refers to identification as well as practices of communities that are located in a positioning of “othering” (in the case of Muslim queers ‘othering’ refers to being queer and being ethnically and religiously marginalized) through a connection (also memory and remembrance) to a supplementary reality they call ‘origin’ or ‘home’.

Diaspora, according to Lavie and Swedenburg (1996), refers to the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places- their connections to spaces they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with “back home”. Diasporic populations, they argue, do not occupy a singular cultural space; but are enmeshed in circuits of social, economic, and cultural ties encompassing both the mother country and the country of settlement.

Aside from all known types of ethnic and national communities that are dispersed and scattered outside of their original or imagined homeland, new types of diasporas are emerging in our globalizing world, those which are based on sexuality and gender identities, rather than merely on ethnic or national ones. A Queer diaspora, similar to ethnic or national diasporas, is a form of displacement of people on the bases of their identities. Yet, what distinguishes queer diaspora from others is the social positioning that is centered on gendered sexual identity and a lack of common imagined homeland (Cant 1997). While in national or ethnic diasporas, people move from one constructed “original” ethnic or national territory to diffused ethnic or national settings, in a queer
diaspora the move is towards centered and concentrated queer centers, cities or neighborhoods, such as Toronto, Berlin, Paris, London, San Francisco and others (Casey 2004:448). It is a move from a space of alienation to a quest for spaces of belonging. Generally speaking, in a queer diaspora, the center locates itself in the queer destiny and not in unqueer origins. In that sense, the use of the word diaspora in the case of queer has some contradictory implications, given the fact that movement is towards “homes” rather than from homes(lands) (Fortier 2001, 2003).

The story of Eden, according to Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler (2000), in their edited volume Queer Diasporas, is a metaphor of originary “queer” exile and diaspora; it is the expulsion of homoeroticism from Eden. The story tells of Adam who was living in a homoerotic relation with God, and this relation was interrupted by the creation of Eve. Her creation resulted in the consequence of the “transferal of divine-human homophilia into a human-centered heterosexuality”, which left God abandoned (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000:1-2). This reading of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic myth suggests that the originary state of human creation is a homosexual one, and that the relation of God to his male creatures, represented by Adam, is already homosexual. Heterosexuality, gay displacement, and the expulsion from Eden all suggest a strong tie between Western sexuality and discourses and experiences of displacements (2000:2).

However, this relation drawn by the authors is seemingly misogynist and male-centered. Eve in this myth is, again yet differently, not the source of human sin, but the source of human heterosexuality and homoerotic expulsion, or even the cause of homophobia. Her creation disturbed the God-Adam love affair. This story supposedly
questions ideas of origin and return and how they are inflected by ideas of sexuality; yet, it is also a metaphor of the notion of gay men's sexuality that is inscribed in the inevitability of movement, expulsion or exile. It also suggests that sexuality is not fixed it is rather on the move, it is always in the state of "sexual alterity" (Patton and Sanchez-Eppler 2000:3), which brings new "insights into the individual and collective paths of queer escape and recognition" (ibid).

In Michael Marks (2000) review of Patton's and Sanchez-Eppler's (2000) *Queer Diasporas*, he argues that according to the book, human identity is fragmented into two parts: sexual and geographical (Marks 2000:240). This division assumes a disjuncture between two worlds, sexual and spatial, and then asks about the relation between them, but it also evokes the idea that individuals might share common conceptions of longing for a geographic home yet be dispersed in different unshared destinies (ibid:241). To my mind, this could be one interpretation of the notion "queer diaspora", where the shared common ground is not *same geographic* origin but similar *conceptualization and experiences of longing for a deserted home*, without a desire to return, but a desire to re-form and re-member new homes in diaspora.

Leslie Wasson (2002) also remarks on the notion of queer diaspora. The title "Queer Diasporas", she writes, suggests that queer and diaspora together imply a dispersed scattering of people who might share the same cultural background or the diffusion of cultural products across social boundaries (Wasson 2002:246). Wasson and Marks consider queer diaspora through its fragmentation: it is queer plus diaspora. Although it might be accurate to divide the concept into its elements and to understand
each separately, this may be nonetheless, insufficient. Queer plus diaspora, are not equal to the final product of the effect of the term “queer diaspora”. The idea of connecting the two already existing terms, transforms the whole meaning of the idea conveyed to create a new conceptualization.

Queer diaspora, I would argue, has two complementary meanings, the first relating to the word queer as a noun and the second when it is an adjective. In the first, the diaspora is of those who are (self) identified as queer, who have found themselves, directly or indirectly, forced to be in a state of constant mobility among different spaces such that their relations to them keeps shifting. It is the movement from “identified origins” to spaces or situations of “identified destinies”; this is not to suggest a necessity for essentialized “origins” or “destinies”. One “origin” can become a “destiny” and another “destiny” can be regarded as “origin”, it depends on one’s relation to his/her positioning. Thus, when using the terms “origin” and “destiny”, it is not necessarily to suggest traces of a traditional order of things, but also to suggest a reversed order. To my mind, “Destiny” can be “origin” and it can also come before “origin”, the same applies to the term “origin”. So, why use the “origin-destiny” dichotomy or even hierarchy, when within the frame of diaspora “origins” are positively viewed as stages of authenticities (Anthias 1998)? Movements are marked and traced by relationality; one movement is remembered and compared through another that follows or passes. In the cases of queer, movements, I argue, are not simply from an “origin” to “destiny” but from both and neither at once and the same time.
Social experiences of "queer" are those of displacements. In fact, one of the meanings of queer is that of social marginalization. In *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word queer means, not only homosexual, but also "bad or worthless" as an adjective and "to spoil or to put out of order" as a verb. The two forms imply a meaning of marginalization that the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual communities adopt and reclaim as a politically empowering identity. But, queer as an empowering identity, is also an experience of material and social displacements. It is a source and a result of alienation and exile. Queer diaspora, thus entails both complementary experiences of a radical diaspora that is dispersed and displaced within its own: it is a diaspora of already dispersed identities that have no roots in any social order. In this sense, queer diaspora is a double diaspora: a social diaspora in being queer and a geographical/material one when migrating. So, queer diaspora, when queer is a noun, refers to the endless movements of queer people from one point, in time and space, to another. Queer here, is the cause and the result of the transition itself.

The other meaning of queer diaspora, suggests that queer is an adjective that describes the nature of the diaspora. We can speak, thus, of queering diaspora or queered diaspora. This type of diaspora, I argue, is not centered on the notion of geographic-spatial "origin" or "destiny" but on self-identified identity and positionality. It is also a diaspora that revises the order and hierarchies of movements in "origin-destiny", and places emphasis on the idea of *alterity* or "otherness".

Diaspora as queer suggests an ideal shift in the understanding of displacement, uprootings and rememberings. Where in diaspora the displacement is mainly spatial or
Gerographical, in queer diaspora, the diaspora is mainly social and the displacement is positioned in sexual identity (see also Georgis 2006:8 and Gopinath 2003:139, 144). In diaspora, generally, there is a move from a spatial center to a scattered reality, to many geographical destinies, while in queer diaspora, given the fact that the foundation of the diaspora is gendered and sexual, it is a move from several geographical-national centers to one destiny. It is not a move from one national geographical space to many, but from scattered communities to a geographical queer space. It is an opposite trend of any other national-ethnic diaspora. Accordingly, in both senses, queer diaspora implies social and spatial displacements based on gender and sexual identities, where the movement is towards an imagined idea of belonging.

Within the literature of diaspora and ideas of belonging, there is little that deals with queers’ notions of diaspora, home and exile, and the spaces between those experiences. Queer Studies, however, is starting to deal more with these issues. Within the last decade, queer theory has shifted its interest from the quest to understand how it feels to be sexually queer, to understand what is the politics that underlies queer identification. Didi Khayatt revisits the notion of ‘Queer Nation’ and questions her position, as an Egyptian lesbian academic, in such a ‘Nation’ that conceptualizes queer in White Western terms. Reflecting on her personal history, she argues for a cultural sensitivity and understanding of the notion queer:

My first hint that my cultural background may have influenced my uneasy relationship to identity categories surfaced when I read that the language of Egypt, Arabic, did not contain an equivalent term for either ‘homosexuality’ or
'heterosexuality' (Schmitt and Sofer, 1992:5). Although I have since rejected this contention, at the time it made me suddenly realize the obvious: that such sexual identities were historically and culturally specific that they were not universal, that they could differ substantively from what is presumed sexual in this culture. Consequently, it is not just a matter of finding another category to embrace this difference, it is the concept of categorizing itself that is foreign to Arab culture. (Khayatt 2002:493)

In this quote Khayatt clearly emphasizes the centrality of cultural differences and particularity in the queer experience. 'Homosexuality' and 'heterosexuality' are not universal categories when understood in their Western meaning. Although same-sex practices always existed in Middle-Eastern Arab societies (Dunne 1998)\textsuperscript{13}, Khayatt asserts that the conceptual categorization of the Western term 'homosexuality' does not exist in same manner and this is where cultural differences become the bridge of the conceptual gap between the experience and the wording or naming of it.

The new conceptual shift in Queer Studies produces a whole range of new literature that expands the conceptualization of the very notion of queer. One cannot speak of queer without touching on other political issues of diasporic, religious, racial, national or global identities. In the following section I expand on the new use of the

\textsuperscript{13} Same-sex practices between men and women are mentioned in various historical literature, like pre-Islamic and post-Islamic poetry.
word queer and the impossibility of divorcing it from experiences of displacements, alienation and marginalizations.

Queer Migration and Diaspora: Case Studies

In their introduction, Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan assert that “Queerness is now global”; representations of queer culture circulate around the globe (Cruz-Malave and Manalansan 2002:1). Nowadays, they argue, sexuality is not private anymore, but increasingly commodified and marketed and queerness has become a globalized object of consumption; thus, queer is becoming more visible. This, in turn, encourages new conceptualizations of somewhat shared queer identities across the globe. Queerness is an identity based on Western popular queer culture, such as movies and TV shows, and on queer notions of consumption. Queerness, therefore, emerges as an identity that is globalized through producing and reproducing images and performances of Western queerness throughout the globe. Queer identity politics travel to other territories and spaces and create new understandings of sexuality and gender. One can even speak of a new form of “imagined community”, to use Benedict Anderson’s (1991) term. This ‘community’ holds annual international pride parades, each year in different locations; it also shares common symbols, like the queer flag and terminology (for example, the words for “lesbian”, “gay”, “trans” or “queer” are used in their English form, with slight difference in pronunciation, in both Arabic and Hebrew). So, queerness is global, and by being global it enables those who are on the move to imagine and share
similar lifestyle everywhere in the world. This results in the emergence of new globalized queered subjectivities and communities.

In *Global Divas*, Martin Manalansan (2003) sheds the light on those new forms of queer subjectivities and communities. Through his study of Filipino gay male migrants in New York, he suggests that identity formation among Filipino diasporic men involves engagement with innovative combination of practices and ideas from different locations, i.e. the Philippines and New York. Within the diasporic reality of Filipino gays in New York, rituals become sites for production and reproduction of a traditional Filipino-Christian ritual, the Santacruzan. Santacruzan as celebrated in the Philippines is a religious beauty pageant festival that manifests the finding of the Holy Cross by Queen Helena, mother of Constantine the Great (c.248- c.329). The performance/ritual of Santacruzan is central to understanding processes of community building and identity formation in the experience of diasporic Filipino gay men in New York. The amalgamation of aspects of religiosity and secularity, or Christianity and queer American gay life provides a space for symbols of both realities to be recreated and renegotiated. In this ritual, Filipino men perform as queens, traditionally celebrating Queen Helena’s finding of Christ’s cross. The queer ritual becomes a performance and contest of drag queens, which mirrors their experiences of displacement, difficulties in relocating away and the rememberings of distant homes, and resurrecting different times and spaces. Furthermore, sexualized images in performances of Santacruzan are reterritorialized from a religious domain to a “gay” one, thus imitating the movements and tensions between the place of birth and the space of settlement. Such shifts and movements destabilize the
notion of “home”. Memories brought up in the ritual/performance resurrect an image of Filipino homeland, while at the same time negotiating being settled in a “new home” in New York. In this ritual, religious as well as sexual symbols (the story of finding the cross and the beauty context), idioms and images of both nations, Filipino and American, provide an implicit narrative of queer diasporic community. Memories of homes and the performance of nostalgia, thus, create new possibilities of “home” for gay Filipino men.

In another study of queer diaspora, Jennifer Petzen (2004) explores the case of Turkish queers in Berlin, Germany. Her main argument is that, being caught in between two cultures, Turkish queers work within “spatial management strategies” in order to create what she calls “home-like” spaces in ethnically German spaces (Petzen 2004:2). For Turkish queers in Berlin, the struggle spread into two spaces, one in the realm of queer politics and the other in the realm of a national-cultural struggle. In the case of struggling for queer rights, coming out of the closet can cause isolation and loss of family networks; and in the case of national-cultural struggle, Turkish queers fight societal racism and discrimination (ibid: 24). As a result of a double sense of isolation, as Petzen claims, it becomes difficult for Turkish queers to find a space within the White German queer community, on the one hand, and within the Turkish heteronormative community, on the other hand. In this sense, Petzen uses the word ‘exile’ to refer to the condition of Turkish queer in Germany; however, she emphasizes her disagreement to those that claim that such states of exile are unchangeable. This state of “never quite belonging” becomes a motivator for Turkish queer activism in Germany; and perhaps this is what drives Turkish queers to reterritorialize and reclaim a sense of “home-like” space in Berlin.
through organizing events that contains sceneries and images of homes, like Turkish and Arabic pop music parties. Thus, to Petzen, using "homelike modality" becomes more accurate when used to describe what goes on in queer spaces that are influenced by migration.

In another book *Invented Identities: Lesbians and Gays Talk about Migration*, Bob Cant (1997) collects stories of queer people in England who left their homes in towns to move to live in big cities, where they find established queer communities. The movement between childhood homes to a new city is not only a transition from one space to another but also a shift from one community to another. In his introduction, Cant explores the link between the experiences of sexual identities and the experiences of movements and migration. His main question is: Where do lesbians and gay men feel that they belong: is it in the communities that reared them and taught them their values, or is it in spaces and communities that they have developed to enable them to cherish their sexuality? (Cant 1997:1). For queer migrants, this question is an everyday concern that maintains tensions and dilemmas of belonging.

In the center of queer migration (a migration conditioned to queer identity) queers experience a “dilemma of loyalties” between their ‘old’ communities and their ‘new’ ones. This type of migration differs from other forms of migrations in the very idea of homeland: queers do not necessary share a “homeland”. Rather, it is a migration that is not primarily based on ethnic, national, or religious identities but mainly on sexuality. In this type of migration, queers, like others, seek to belong and attach to both worlds, the one before the transition and the other after it. Their inventions of identities draw on their
relations to the "community of origin" and their "queer community". Although for many queers, migration is felt as emancipation and homes as prisons, their relations to the two experiences are more complex, since their lives are defined by the thin line between their memories of their childhood homes and their aspiration for a proud queer life. Thus, queers are endlessly seeking to belong to both worlds openly (Cant 1997:1).

Queer people have often fled their families and their communities of origin, because there was no space for them there. Migration then can open opportunities for them to develop their queer identities, but it can also bring opportunities to reassess their childhood and memories of their childhood homes (1997:6). In the cities, Cant argues, a unifying emphasis on coming out emerges in the modern queer movements, and such emphasis enables the community to share pattern of their lives as a whole as well as the patterns of their migration (1997:3). Thus, for many queers, Cant argues, migration is experienced as freedom, while the family and its values are perceived as prison. Queers feel that they need to escape the shame which, is believed, that homosexuality will bring to them and their families. Away from family and community social pressures, queers develop new lives for themselves, to find their own voices and to explore their own histories in a new light (Cant 1997:7).

Gays and lesbians sense of 'attachment' remains a strong feature of their identity. Many are never able to make the move, and those who do are often caught in between their loyalty to the community which nurtured them in their early years and their loyalty to the community which nurtured them as a lesbian or gay adult. To illustrate his point, Cant quotes a self-defined South Asian lesbian who lives in England, who uses the
metaphor of exile to express the experiences of diasporic queers whose families homes are spaces of exile and refuge:

“Our families are very important, as they give us a base, a refuge from racism and give us a sense of our own identity as Indian people...whether we come out or not, we are exiles within our communities. If we come out, we still feel that sense of exile because we are unable to share a very real part of ourselves with them.” (Cant 1997:10)

Experiences of queer migration, as Cant concludes, enable us to speak of a notion of "two mindedness" in migration (1997:14). Such a notion does not imply dishonesty; rather it describes a state where people are engaged in connecting the two levels of consciousness and in bringing the two conflicted experiences into reconciliation.

When home reminds queers of experiences of displacement and exile, the very notions of “home” as well as “exile” alter their meanings simultaneously; home embraces exile when one is denied identity at homes, and exile becomes wished as home when one relocates a denied and displaced identity in the new reality of exile. So far, I have discussed nuances in “queer diaspora” in an attempt to develop and expand the concept to include sexual and gendered identities. I will eventually take up the Muslim queer community in Toronto. But before I do that, in the next section I explore notions of homes and exile within the experience of queer migrants.
Theorizing "Home-Exile"

Queers movements and their locating and re-constitution of spaces of belonging are unique in their positioning. Being marginalized in heteronormative societies, homes for queers are not taken for granted. Homes are usually associated with both heterosexual and heteronormative characteristics: they are spaces of familiarity and comfort. But when the familiarity becomes estrangement and discomfort, queers’ homes move somewhere else and, thus, their initial quest for estrangement, paradoxically, enables other spaces of homes.

Is home always already a space of familiarity in homeland, or are homes imagined and reproduced in homelands as well as in exile? What is exile? Is it a geographical uprooting that denies both acknowledgment and access or a symbolic and social uprooting? Building on Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2001, 2003) research on queer migration, I argue that queers’ relation to home and exile lies between the borderzone of the two notions. I relate to queer identity as a social positioning that is not confined only to sexuality, (trans)gender, desires or self-sexual identifications; but also as a set of social positionings that involve experiences of marginalization, exile from heteronormative family and home(land) and socially/culturally denied closeted life. Being queer, hence, is being in a state of re-configuring a space of home, making home, mimicking an imaginary home and moving toward home that is out of “original” or “natural” homes. Home for queers, as Fortier argues, becomes a destiny that one moves to, and not an origin that one comes from (2003:2-3).
Drawing on the existing literature on exile, I argue, similarly to Hamid Naficy (1999), whose work I shall discuss later, that exile is not only confined to material, physical or geographical uprooting, it is also a metaphorical, symbolic and social one. When people’s identities dislocate them from their feeling of attachment or when they are denied acknowledgment in homelands, they are in a social or symbolic exile. Being symbolic does not necessarily imply that it does not exist in reality. What it does mean is that it may not, necessarily, be caused by a geographical mobility.

When home is not fixed on an original territory and when exile is not only found in foreign lands, notions of exile and home cease being opposites. One can speak of an experience of home in exile and of exile at home. One can also theorize and conceptualize home and exile as necessary for defining each other since they may co-exists at once and the same time.

**Displacing Home**

"Home" is a central experience in the lives of people who are in constant mobility, be it exile, immigration, nomadism or resettlement. Traditionally, “home” is desired and imagined as an ongoing longing for spaces of familiarity, both as familial and as suitableness/comfortable and as spaces of belongings and attachments (Fortier 2003: 4 and 2001:407). In the following, I relocate some of the recent literature on the notion of home within the following questions: (1) does “home” already imply desires for
belonging to familiar spaces? (2) Can we speak of “home” not as confined to space or one territory but as socially re/delocated through (re)imagination (Fortier 2003:2)?

A structural notion of home confines ‘home’ as conditioned to originality, familiarity and materialism. A traditional understanding of home as Margaret Morse argues views home as “a place, region or state to which one property belongs, on which one’s affections centre, or where one finds refuge, rest, or satisfaction.” (Morse 1999:68) This definition confuses or blurs the borders between home and house, as articulated by David Morely (2000), rereading it as a Western understanding of home that views home as inscribed in the physical structure of house (ibid:19). “House”, in traditional understanding, is the literal object and the “material place in which one physically lives” (Naficy 1999:5).

In Home, Exile, Homeland, Hamid Naficy (1999) introduces a variety of conceptualizations of ‘home’. In the introduction, Naficy problematizes the association of home to homeland, arguing that home can also be relocated in exile (i.e. away from homelands). He marks a distinction among three framing concepts: house, home, homeland (1999:5). While house is the literal and material object in which one lives, home is the analytical category. Home is temporary, moveable, built or rebuilt, and carried in memory as people move. Homeland is the most abstract and mythical of all three notions, and it generally refers to countries of origins. The movement in the three notions is from material to ideal, and according to Naficy, the concept of ‘home’ is situated in gap between material and ideal.
For Smadar Lavie (1996) home is not necessarily confined in a home(land) or in a space of origin or familiarity. Radically speaking, home, for Lavie, is a state of belonging and identification to an imagined idea of home. Home, thus, does not entail an attachment to a familiar or comfortable state, rather, to political and emotional attachment to nation and state. In her study of Palestinian citizens of Israel and Mizrahi Jewish citizens of Israel (descendants of Arab countries), Lavie points to the alienation that both communities feel while presumably 'being at home'. For Mizrahi Jews, who construct Israel as (a historical-religious) homeland, being under a hegemonic European Jewish (Ashkenazi) state-control, it is a state of exile or diaspora, where home is not home anymore. Similarly, for Palestinian citizens of Israel, living under a Jewish European state in their indigenous home(lands), is a state of alienation and exile. Therefore, in such conditions there is no 'home' at 'home'; home becomes impossible and, thus, relocated and reimagined in the borderlines between 'original home and desired 'home'.

In nomadism, a state defined by John Durham Peters (1999:32), as being home everywhere but lacking a fixed ground, home is found in mobility and in the experience of displacement from locations. In nomadism, home is not deterritorialized but constantly reterritorialized. Nomads' homes are already located and dislocated, and thus relocated, yet without an imagined or desired home(land) (1999:21). The lack of desires for attachment is central to the definition of nomads. Although the experience of nomadism is radical in terms of deconstructing home and its relation to one territory or origin, I wonder if the constant repetition of movement and resettlement, as even Peters argues, is home in itself. Repetition creates familiarity and sometimes comfort that can be
considered as home. Hence, the discussion of nomadism as a “de-homing” state can be problematic. Home is fixed for nomads through the repetition of movement: for nomads, home is everywhere.

Home, I argue, is never fully accomplished; it is the endless imaginations and rememberings. Home is never fully constructed, but fragmented through contexts. When moving, we take home everywhere with us in shape of memories. We remember it and re-imagine it (Fortier 2003). Homes transforms, so when visiting it, after being away, one is always taken by a surprise; something has changed, while not having witnessed it happening. Thus, sometimes home ceases to be a space of familiarity, but becomes an alienated and a distant entity, and what is left behind is memories in forms of wish-images. Home, may be imagined as a space of comfort, yet not always as familial in the traditional sense of family. People who had to leave their homes as a result of an act of violence, sometimes quest for an opposite image of their childhood homes. Sometimes, in the case of queer people, if childhood homes are heteronormative, they imagine a queer home instead, as a space of comfort yet not familially. Home is relocated in imaginations, although it can be transformed and mobilized in the material sense, it is always in relation to a social idea of what is home. Home is not one, but varies dependently on the cultural context or even identity politics.
Re-locating Exile

Exile is argued to be a material uprooting that is a product of violence, wars or poverty, in which one is denied access to home or homeland. This section questions the materiality of the notion ‘exile’ and proposes a social (i.e. non-material) understanding of the experience. I start by reviewing some of the recent literature on exile.

Orm Øverland, in “Visions of Home: Exiles and Immigrants”, confines exile to a necessary material uprooting, where return is denied or unwanted. She draws a distinguishing line between an emigrant and an exile. Both, she argues, are a position of departure (Øverland 2005:7). However, the two experiences are different types of departure: the first is voluntary and the second is forced and enforced. Exile is a position of remaining -one remains an exile- and immigrant is one of becoming -one becomes an immigrant. Exile is a lifelong identity, which may persist long after the home country had opened its borders for a return. An exile is a divided personality between the positions of “never feel fully at home” in the new country and never home in the “old” country. An exile may not only live a double life, but also may be alienated from both lives: “the loss of an old homeland is not necessarily followed by the acquisition of new one” (2005:8).

Exile, hence, is one of a lasting experience that has no way back in memories or identity. It becomes an identity that is carried everywhere while being always the center of social relations.

John Peters Durham (1999) argues that exile goes back to human’s material uprooting- from the Garden of Eden, homeland or the womb- and the social metaphorical
uprooting— from God or even oneself. Exile is suggested as a painful banishment from one’s homeland; it generally implies a trauma that makes home no longer possible (ibid:19). Exile, thus, is always related to a notion of lost homelands and national identities. Although Durham mentions the possibility of non-material exile, he reasserts that exile is conditioned to materialistic uprooting: it “is the quest for an earthly home or homeland from which one is, for whatever reason, estranged” (1999:36, emphasis added). Exile is distinguished from nomadism in the stance toward home and homelessness: while nomads dislocate home in a territory, exile locates and centers home in a homeland that is distant and unapproachable (1999:31).

In his introduction to Home, Exile, Homeland, Hamid Naficy (1999) deconstructs some of the material uprooting conditions to exile. Naficy argues that although it is inevitably bound to homeland and the possibility of return, exile can also be at home, when the displacement is social and not geographical or material. It is possible to be forced into exile and not to wish to a return, or to return to find home not a home anymore: “to return home but not fully arrive, to be nomad and yet in exile” (1999: 3). Exile’s wish for home transforms into desired memories for home that no longer exist. Exile then is also a social uprooting.

Edward Said (1984:173-186) focuses on the subjective and humanistic aspects of exile. For him, exile is a product of material spatial uprooting. Reflecting upon his personal experience, Said criticizes those who romantically glorify exile as an ideal positioning of a thinker. He argues that exile is a terrible experience and an essential sadness, where the achievement of an exile is always undermined by the loss of
something left forever behind. It is the “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home” (1984:173, emphases added). Exiles, as Said continues, are cut off from their geographical roots and their past; therefore, they find themselves in an urgent reconstitution of their lost past and rootless present by a desire to belong to a restored people.

Exile, I argue, similarly to Naficy (1999), is a concept that is socially, symbolically and culturally constructed. Exclusion and denial of acknowledgment of ethnic, religious, gender or sexual identity is symbolically and metaphorically an act of displacement and uprooting. When ‘exile’, as a notion, is divorced from materiality, one can, then, speak of exile at home, and one can also speak of exile as the lasting experience that one takes and travels with, even when supposedly feeling at home. Exile is marginalization that rips the human from her/his sense of belonging; it is a condition of symbolic uprooting that becomes internalized and remembered everywhere. It is a product of subtle and symbolic violence that commemorates the past-at-home as fear or trauma, therefore, the movement from home to exile is not always from nostalgic pleasant times to sadness; but from imprisoning to emancipation, as in the case of queer notion of Exile, which I will discuss in the following chapters. Exile is a state that refuses to be fixed in one experience; perhaps it is nomadism that, in contrast John Durham Peters, desires or wishes for home(land).
Not Fully at Home and Not Fully in Exile: Experiences of Queer Migrants

Drawing upon my understanding of home and exile, as explained above, I now turn to discuss the dialectical relation between home and exile. I argue that home and exile are not binary oppositions; they are, rather, dialectics in the sense that one comes to define the other and with this defining relation the one transforms the meaning of the other. Referring to Marxist definition of dialectics, Robert Murphy (1971:102-103) suggests that dialectics is not merely a unity of two or three concepts; rather it is a (conflicting) relation where the one concept is an expression of the other while they are transformative of each other.\textsuperscript{14}

In other words, I argue that home and exile are different from each other and one is derived from the other. I take the example of queer, since queer is not only a position that is socially distinguished (and marginalized), but also as an identity or social positioning that is always transforming. This suggests a unique connection between the position of queer and the experience of home (in terms of origins and in terms of family) or exile (as being socially denied identity). Queer people migrate and sometimes escape their home(land) in search for a place of visibility, belonging and comfort in being “out”. Drawing on Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2001, 2003) argument, I argue that queer as an identity and a social positioning can not be fully at home or fully in a state of exile. For queer people, on the one hand, heteronormative and homophobic homes create (moments

\textsuperscript{14} In this thesis I use the term *dialectics* as an analytical tool to understand the relations between experience of home and exile. I do not intend to use the term as my central theoretical approach.
of) exile. On the other hand, when escaping a homophobic ‘origin’, there is always a possibility of re-imagining and re-experiencing home in exile; thus sometimes, home is where exile is and exile is home.

**Exile at home: Queer Displacement in ‘home-as-origin’**

An experience that many queer people encounter is the destabilization of home as a space of comfort or familiarity, identification and placement or rooting. For many queer people who live in heteronormative societies, where kinship, marriage, interactions or family structure is always already heterosexual, home is a space of denial of self identity that is sometimes associated with being violently ‘closeted’. Instead of imagining home or homeland as a space of familiarity and security, for queers home is fear. It is fear of exposing different desires, fear of being ‘outed’ and fear from loss of attachments and loss of familiarity. In such cases, home(land) resembles exile in terms of lacking security and a feeling of belonging. To be at home is to be a stranger, and to be in exile is imagined as a space of comfort and freedom: as home. Queer movement from ‘home’ to ‘exile’ locates the estrangement in ‘home’ and not in exile (Fortier 2003:3).

In heteronormative and homophobic societies queer identity is denied acknowledgment, and sometimes denied existence. People who are queer are alienated from their homes and sometimes the desired ‘home’ is imagined ‘out there’ in an other country (Fortier 2003:2, 2001:407-408); their ‘childhood’ or ‘familiar’ home is imagined as exile. Queers in heteronormative homes are metaphorically and in some cases spatially
denied from existing, they are “kicked out” if they are sexually “out”. The formation of home in exile when exile-is-home(land) is a product of symbolic violence, in addition to the possibility of physical violence. Although living in a space imagined as home(land), Mizrahis and Palestinians in Israel feel isolated, diasporic and exilic. In these cases, as Smadar Lavie (1996) demonstrates, home and exile are located in the borderzones, between ‘here’, the reality, and ‘there’, the imagination. Queer home and exile share similar borderzones, and even more so, the two sometimes become difficult to distinguish.

Home is exile when people are socially dislocated in what is thought to be ‘home’. In heteronormative societies, queer’s desires are marginalized and the heteronormative model of desire is glorified. When home excludes those who are queer in terms of being deviant or different, queers are asked to move out if they want to be who they are. Queer people are dislocated from home without a possibility of a return. The symbolic and sometimes physical dislocation involves uprooting from imagined and experienced ‘origins’. This uprooting dislocates ‘home-as-origin’ in reality, and relocates it symbolically in memories, which uprooted queers take with them when they migrate looking for home away from their ‘childhood home’ (Fortier 2003:2-4).

**Home in Exile: Queer Home is ‘Out’ there**

When home is exile, migration is imagined as homecoming (Fortier 2003:2): exile becomes an option for home. Out there, in cities were the queer scene is visible (not
necessarily accepted by heteronormative social institutions), queer migrants imagine and desire their queerness to be indistinguishable from the heterosexual society, (meaning not discriminatory). They see themselves surrounded by familiarity in both terms; on the one hand, the habitual environment that they are used to, and, on the other, a familiarity where the queer community is the family. Avtar Brah describes this notion as “homing desires” (1996:180). ‘Homing desires’ is “decidedly cast in migration and defined against the physical return to originary home(land)” (ibid). It suggests a longing to belong to a home that is out here in exile and not at ‘home-as-origin’. In this sense home is produced through displacement of desires from ‘originality’ and ‘fixity’. ‘Homing desires’, as a concept, reinforces the idea of home as always imagined, even when being at home, be it homelands or in exile.

In my interviews with Muslim queers in Toronto many interviewees identified Church Street, where the gay village is, as their desired home. Some even argued that they imagined the existence of such queer visibility in the city, when still in ‘homelands’, and as soon as they landed in Toronto they searched for it. Most of the people I met in Salaam, the Muslim queer community, actually live in the ‘Gay Village’; in queer talk it is re-named as ‘The Village’. The naming of ‘The Village’, in the heart of the city of Toronto, connotes a romantic picturing of home as a cozy and safe place that houses a small number of families. In the interviews, they identified “The Village” as a home that does not resemble their deserted homophobic, insecure, closeted and unfamiliar home. Thus, exile as ‘out’ (in the meaning of away from home and ‘out of the closet’) is better lived and imagined as a home.
The other reason why exile is imagined as home is due to the possibility of relocating a displaced and uprooted identification. While at home identity and identification with difference is denied, exile becomes the imagined source of identity acknowledgment. Many of the Muslim queers I interviewed indicated that the reason they immigrated to Canada (precisely to the Gay Village in Toronto) is the possibility to be ‘out’ without fear of being denied their (sexual/gender) identity. In being queer, Muslim immigrants in Toronto, feel identification with other non-Muslim queers. They relocate the object that caused their dislocation from childhood home, to the queer-Western new home. Through relocating and re-placing the displaced, queers in exile, paradoxically, they become at home.

Conclusion

In this chapter I attempted to broaden the concept of diaspora by suggesting a queer understanding of the concept. A ‘queer diaspora’ thus, is a social as well as material diffusion of people who share similar social positioning of sexual or gender identity. It is a diaspora that does not assume ethnic, national or geographic origins, nor is it conditioned to one destiny; rather, it is a move from several ‘origins’ to centers of queer-identified destinies. Queer diaspora suggests a move from a national or transnational understanding of diaspora and displacement, to a movement from a re-imagined and re-remembered homes to other imagined and queer constructed destinies (Georgis 2006 and Gopinath 2003). In this sense, it differs from the current literature on
queer diaspora (i.e Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 2002, Patton and Sánchez-Eppler 2000 and Wasson 2002), as I argued that it is not merely a move from spaces of alienation to spaces of imagined commonality, familiarity and identification, but it is also a move that disturbs the traditional notion of ‘origin’ and ‘destiny’ in the conceptualization of diaspora.

This understanding of diaspora produces other new conceptualizations of notions of home and exile. Such an understanding promises to unsettle the dual understanding of home and exile, and instead, promotes a dialectical one, where the one entity is understood only in relation to its other. Thus, switching the order of such relation results in transforming the meaning of the entities concerned, so exile might be understood as a variation of home, and home can be understood in terms of exile.

While I have argued that the queer in exile can desire home, it is worth noting the impossibility of speaking of a full arrival home and complete exile. While queers feel home is ‘out’, they never cease remembering ‘home’ that is left behind. Muslim queer migrants are strongly attached to their homes ‘back home’ by insisting on keeping strong ties with their families, celebrating home traditions and situating their lives in Canada in relation to their memories of their lives back home. Rejecting memories of violence, identity, denial and isolation, Muslim queer migrants re-remember homes as romantic times where one is in his/her ‘natural’ surrounding. In that sense there is a limit to the idea of being in full exile.

“Original” home is always re-remembered and re-constructed in the consciousness and practices of queer migrants. Home is not only far away but it invades
the new homes produced here. Some of Muslim queer migrants’ notions of homes are wished for and sometimes practiced to resemble homes in their country of ‘origins’. For Salaam members, it is important to celebrate *Eids*, Muslim holidays, and hold Friday prayers, so that queer Muslims do not feel alienated and alone. On the death of one member’s mother in her homeland, another member of Salaam emailed Salaam’s general email list, asking members of the community to conduct a prayer to the soul of the dead. The email indicated that it is important for them to get together for prayers to support themselves “especially since many of us are far away from our land of birth, and feel the pain of grieving from a distance”. Paradoxically, memories of homes become desired as home, where queers share different cultures, languages, ethics or morals with those whom they left behind. Queer homes are located in the liminal spaces in between new-homes and lost-homes; they are never fully achieved and never forgotten.

When home and exile exist at the same time and space, their relation becomes complementary rather than contradictory. What distinguishes Salaam is their renegotiation of the two experiences simultaneously. They create a community-home for their members in exile, while remembering their relation to their homes in homeland and thus reproducing or it in exile.

Queer notions of home and exile exist in states of impossibility and paradoxes, since they are produced through painful experiences of loss of romantic home(land) memories and loss of identity (sexual or gendered) acknowledgement at home(land). What is left are memories that are constantly reworked as a practice of survival in the gap of spaces between: what is “home” and what is “exile”?
The next chapter explores Salaam’s notion of community and positions it within the larger queer and Muslim communities, and it also describes Salaam’s ideology and practices.

CHAPTER TWO

Contextualizing Salaam: A Community on the Borderzone

On the fifth of October 2005, Salaam held its annual “Peace Iftar”, a public event for breaking the fast in the holy month of Ramadan. The event was organized by Salaam and took place in the hall of an Anglican church in downtown Toronto. Many non-Muslim Canadians came to this event as an act of solidarity with the group’s mission and ideology, and some Muslims from the Canadian Muslim Congress also attended. The event was initiated by Azan (a call for prayer) followed by Salah or Salat\(^{15}\) (a prayer), where men, women and transpeople prayed side by side with no gender segregation. On June 26\(^{th}\) of the same year, members of Salaam marched in the Toronto Pride Parade along with hundreds of other groups. The group, which numbered ten to thirteen persons, held a banner with the words: “Salaam: Muslim Queer Community, Celebrating Culture, Liberating Tradition”, and marched behind GLAD, Gays and Lesbiins of African Descent, following the South Asian Hijras\(^{16}\) group. On the evening of that day, in the

\(^{15}\) Both pronunciation are used. Muslims from South-Asian usually pronounce it Salat (or sometimes they use Namaz in Urdu or Farsi) and Arabs pronounce it Salah.

\(^{16}\) Hijra is an indigenous conceptualization for male to female transgenders or transsexuals in some South Asian cultures.
midst of many queer events, Salaam held a party with Western, South-Asian and Middle Eastern music and belly dancing drag performances.

The two events mark Salaam’s participation in two seemingly separate spaces. Such spaces can be imagined as a dialectics, in the sense that one contrasts the other (one is religious and the other is secular), and yet they both construct a third space that is shaped by the synthesis of secularism (Pride Parade) and religiosity (Iftar prayers). The one side of the image reflects the symbolic and religious meaning of the Arabic word “Islam”, that is, “submission to God” and humility, while the other side of the image shows scenes of celebration, liberty and pride. The two events also illustrate Salaam’s attempts to create spaces of familiarity and belonging in the queer and the Muslim sense. My concern in this chapter is to scrutinize the two spaces and to situate Salaam in a political and theoretical context. My use of the word ‘territorialization’ is intended to de-romanticize Salaam as a community that is taken for granted, and rather argue that Salaam is a product of political and social forces. Following the dialectical image I presented before, I argue that Salaam is territorialized on the borderzone of two communities, the Muslim and the queer. Borderzones, according to Lavie (1996), are liminal spaces that are conditioned to constant alterity, inconstancy and unpredictability. By introducing the idea of ‘borderzones’, Lavie and Swedenburg suggest a ‘third time-space’ concept that transcends the binary of “identity-as-essence” and “identity-as-conjuncture” (1996:13).

17 I use the term “borderzone” as a tool to understanding Salaam’s positioning within the Muslim and queer scene in Toronto. In this thesis I do not attempt to necessary critique such concept or develop a theoretical approach.
This positioning of not being entirely attached to both communities enables Salaam to have more freedom in its strategies, activities and ideologies; it enables Salaam to perform queer as well as Muslim practices without being confined to follow either model of the Muslim community or the queer community. I also argue that Salaam, being a diasporic community, it is caught in ongoing attempts to reconfigure its ‘home’ in a condition of social and material ‘exile’, by creating a fusion of Muslim and queer beliefs and practices. First, I shall set the queer, diasporic and multicultural context within which Salaam exists in Toronto, arguing that this context sets the conditions and provisions of the existence of such a group.

Contextualization: Queer Politics, Diaspora and Discourses of Multiculturalism in Canada

Since the 1960s, the queer movement in Canada, as Tom Warner (2002) argues, has been focused on demands of rights, equality and acknowledgment. A shift in the focus of the movement occurred in the 1980s and the 1990s as sexuality (i.e. anticensorship campaigns, bathhouses, sexual visibility in public spaces) was introduced into the politics of the queer struggle and these concerns became contextualized into localized queer communities (Warner 2002:267). As a result of the policing of same-sex sexuality in the urban scene, queer movements directed their efforts to claim ‘queer spaces’. By ‘queer space’, Warner argues, queer ‘liberationists’ referred to the demand to make their sexuality accepted on its own terms rather than being determined by heterosexual sexuality. As a result, bars, clubs, queer bathhouses, drag performances, S&M scenes,
Pride week, parks and others venues all became spaces that were ‘queered’; this way, such spaces were literally transformed and redefined (Warner 2002:302). Increasingly, scenes of nudity in pride events become more popular as a representation of queer liberation and as a challenge to mainstream social conformism. Nevertheless, Warner (2002) claims such activities and shifts in the struggle were not universal among different queer communities; indeed, many groups express their disapproval of scenes of nudity and sadomasochism in parades, arguing that such scenes reinforce negative stereotypes of the queer community.

The other shift that Warner draws attention to is the emergence of the visibility of culturally diverse queer communities and the flow of diverse small and rural queer communities to larger urban centres (2002:305). Many Canadian queers are still living in isolation and fear, and the discourse about queer spaces and what occurs within them, does not reflect their everyday life of those in rural areas. Many queers in small cities, towns, and in rural or more isolated areas of Canada, continue to struggle against homophobia and heterosexism and are often left alone in this struggle. Queers in rural areas, according to Warner, usually have difficulties developing or maintaining positive self-images and identities. In fact, simply being open and honest about their sexual orientation can “result in confrontation or hostility, social exile, discriminatory treatment and, sometimes, acts of violence” (2002:306, emphasis added). Thus, some rural queers seek to move out of the towns to big cities where no one knows they are queer but where they can be “out” in a more visible queer scene.
A major change in queer communities in big cities has been the increasing diversity of ethnicities and nationalities. This change has occurred along with the popularization of the discourse of diversity and multiculturalism in Canadian everyday reality (Bannerji 2000:35), such as talks about diversity in languages, food or cultural festivals in the Canadian big cities. Multiculturalism, a policy implemented in 1971, was a federal government initiative to transform ideals of multicultural society into policies that are imposed on multiple programs (Elliott and Fleras 1992:274). “Multiculturalism” has often been conceived as an “ideology” (Lewycky 1992:359, Bannerji 2000:45) that became a hegemonic discourse in the Canadian society (Lewycky 1992:372). Such ideologies are not without material implications. Lewycky (1992) points to the economic-capitalist dimension of multiculturalism by referring to the government support of “Multiculturalism and Business” conference held in Toronto in 1986. The main message conveyed was that “Multiculturalism means business” (Lewycky 1992:375). I use the word “Multiculturalism” to refer to the discourses surrounding the notion of diversity and tolerance. This is by no means to suggest a romanticization of the lives of diverse communities in Toronto or to suggest an illumination of hostility and racism; on the contrary, I use the term “multiculturalism” to elaborate on the uncritical reproduction of governmental policy by many social change groups.

Parallel to the increasing discourse of multiculturalism, queer communities ceased to be predominantly White as other queers on the margins began to claim a presence within the larger queer community. Such minority groups pushed queer discourse to include articulation of racism and marginalization within the queer and the non-queer
communities. They brought new challenges to the queer established mainstream hegemony in dealing with issues of race, (dis)ability, cultural marginalization, lack of awareness and under-representation (Warner 2002:314).

One of the examples of diversity that Warner describes is the Queer Muslim community in Toronto and the debate over Islam and homosexuality. He argues that in many immigrant communities, the preservation of cultural and religious beliefs takes on particular importance, where social disapproval or ostracism are much more isolating and traumatic (Warner 2002:322). Queers in such communities usually have more to worry about such as outing, the fact that they live in already diasporic realities, and sometimes are overly defensive about cultures and traditions of their countries of origin. Warner quotes Rahim Chunara, a Muslim gay man who describes the reality of some queer Muslims: “to some extent, my coming out put my family in the closet” (Globe and Mail: A12 in Warner 2002:322). For others, Warner continues, coming out as gays or lesbians means risking many other aspects of their identities, as Subira M’Walimu and Fatumar Omar explained in a 1993 article in Qouta Magazine: ‘It is not uncommon…to renounce their faith in Islam and their Muslim identities because they believe, or are forced to believe, that being Muslim and homosexual are totally incompatible’ (Nov. 1993:1 in Warner 2002:322).

Warner argues that as the Muslim population of Canada has grown, queer Muslims have come out of the closet publicly in increasing numbers. The discourse of homosexuality in Canada is often brought to the attention of the public, including many Muslim clerics who have, in reaction, publicly opposed the social acceptance of 55
homosexuality and the extension of legislated rights to gays and lesbians. According to Warner (2002:322-323), an Islamic community leader in Toronto announced in 2000 his public support for the Canadian Alliance because, in his words, it fights to prohibit the life style of gays and lesbians (ibid). The Toronto District Muslim Education Assembly, along with Christian family values advocates, waged a vigorous campaign throughout 1999 and 2000 to prevent the Toronto District School Board from including sexual orientation issues in a human rights and equity policy for Toronto schools.

It was not only Muslims who expressed opposition to homosexuality and queer life on the basis of cultural-religious defences. Samer, an active member of Salaam told me that he once was interviewed by The Globe and Mail to respond to current Canadian Prime Minister Steven Harper, who was a member of the Canadian Parliament at that time. Harper expressed his concern against same-sex marriage by his cynical (ab)use of the logic of “Multiculturalism”. He argued, according to Samer, that in the name of “multiculturalism” we should respect other cultures’ opposition to same-sex marriages. Samer confronted Harper’s argument by presenting himself as a Muslim Arab queer who is concerned with racism and stereotypes of various cultures that are accused of homophobia. Samer told me that he wanted to show that there are Muslim (Arab) queers who belong to the community who are not against same-sex marriages or queer struggle, and that not all non-White cultures are homophobic as Harper wants to believe.

Despite such attitudes and obstacles, in the 1990s Muslim queers started to be organized and become more visible. The first prominent group to bring Islam and queer identity together was Salaam: The Muslim Queer Community. As indicated in Warner’s research,
Salaam portrays itself an organization that creates a safe place for Muslims allowing them to explore what it mean to be a Muslim in a spiritual, cultural, political and social sense, rather than emphasising that it is a religious group.

Al-Fatiha\(^\text{18}\), a faith-based group of queer Muslims in the United States, had a similar mission to Salaam\(^\text{19}\). The group’s coordinator, Mohammed Khan, adopted a stance reflective of queer liberation activists of the 1970s, and challenged the homophobic chair of an Islamic community group in the United States (Warner 2002:323). His opinion piece appeared in Xtra! in 2000:

Gay and lesbian equality will change mainstream and Muslim cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. We will redefine the family, broaden marriage and its embedded and restrictive gender roles, and challenge dominant views about sexual and reproductive choice. We will challenge old boundaries between the private and the public, as the public has always been defined in such a way as to exclude women and gay people”. (Xtra: 1 June 2000 1 in Warner 2002: 323)

Thus, within the discourses of diversity and tolerance, Salaam can be seen as a product of such discourses. In other words, it is not ‘natural’ or taken for granted to have a community which promotes unity between Islam and queer, as some members of Salaam claimed when I asked about the very combination of the two social elements. However, it is not unusual to see a community like Salaam in a context of multiple experiences of displacement, queer politics and “multicultural” talk. These conditions enable such a formation. The same conditions also force Salaam to be located not in one space, but on the borders of diasporic Islam, Muslim and queer communities. In addition to


\(^{19}\) In fact, since 1999 the two groups worked closely for a while
“multiculturalist” discourses and transformations in queer politics in Canada, the experience of diaspora on both Muslim and queer levels, is yet another central contextual element that Salaam is dealing with and reacting to.

As a Muslim community in Canada, Salaam is a diasporic community within a larger Muslim diaspora. According to Chantal Saint-Blancat (2002), Muslims in the diaspora, as with those of other diasporas, construct their identities in confrontation with otherness. The emergence of Muslim diasporic identities is based on the refusal to be assigned an ‘essentialized’, inherent, unavoidable, fixed religious culture (Saint-Blancat 2002:142). Thus, Islam in diaspora is hesitant to redefine collective identity through a struggle for control of codes of meaning and the symbolic boundaries that set the term of otherness. That is where formations of different Muslim communities become central, and their function is to respond to the spiritual search of believers, to propose an ethical framework and to strengthen the larger community (ibid:145).

Most members of Salaam relate to their country of origin as ‘home’, whether they lived there for a significant period of time or were born there and came to Canada at a very young age. There is always another ‘home’ to the newly constructed ‘homes’ that shape the community’s collective identity, as well as their subjective sense of belonging and memories. Most of Salaam’s practices are inspired by external images of home, which do not exist in the surrounding Western environment and are also constructed by what Saint-Blancat (2000:141) calls collective “religious memory” of religious practices in an “original” setting. Being located in the queer area of the city and leading an independent non-traditional lifestyle can become a major factor that alienates Salaam as a
community from other diasporic Muslim communities, from the Muslim umma (a universal notion of Muslim community) and from Canadian mainstream culture. On the one hand, in relation to the larger Muslim community, by being queer, Salaam is considered an external Westernized community, as a prominent member and founder of Salaam told me. According to him, many Muslims in Canada believe that you cannot be Muslim and queer: if you are queer you are automatically not a Muslim. Such an argument immediately excludes Salaam from being part of the larger Muslim diaspora in Canada and from the wider Muslim umma.

On the other hand, Salaam as a community is determined not to be assimilated and amalgamated into the dominant White-Christian queer community. Salaam’s refusal to assimilate is hardly a choice, given the fact that for many Muslims, Salaam cannot (really) be a “Muslim” group, and is seen as a Western secular group that consists of members who have lost their roots in ‘real’ Muslim origins. Rejecting being White helps members to focus on their Muslim ‘origins’, while at the same time, rejecting hegemonic Muslim identity. In this sense, Salaam is structurally located on the borderzone of the two identity-spaces of Western and Muslim cultures. This is not to suggest a negative or weak positioning; on the contrary, sometimes such positioning can lead to productive changes or, in Lavie’s words, borderzones are spaces that blow-up, in terms of becoming sites for transformations, creativity and social change. Salaam is a community that neither produces an absolutely queer space nor an entirely Muslim one; rather, it is an illustration of the impossibility of full arrival into one site and departure from another. This is not to suggest that Salaam is a failure, or that they should seek an ideal condition as a creolized
mixture of both Islam and queer. It is nonetheless, an attempt to problematize notions of community through the example of Salaam.

Discourses of "multiculturalism", the realities of diaspora and the new emerging queer politics in big cities, have contributed to the creation of spaces where Salaam could practice the 'essence' of its own politics and positionings. Salaam, then, is a product of such interconnected contexts, but it also reproduces other new realities and discourses in its Islamization of queer identity-spaces and its queering of Muslim identity-spaces, through its activities and events (I will elaborate on this later). In the following sections I shall delineate Salaam by marking its positioning within queer and Muslim scenes in Toronto.

On The Borderzone: Territorializing Community and Reconfiguring 'Homes' and 'Exiles'

Salaam, being in Toronto, exists in the context of a capitalist-consumerist market. Most of their events and meetings are organized through email lists, which assume their members have Internet access. Most of the group decisions are made through email circulation and email list discussion. In that sense, Salaam is a form of virtual community- and becoming more virtual, i.e. via communication through the internet.

Miranda Joseph (2002) argues that community is always invoked as an indicator of a high quality of life where everyone shares a sense of caring, sharing, understanding and belonging (vii). Against such romantic claims, she argues that capitalism and modernity depend on and generate the discourse of community in order to legitimate
social hierarchies (vii). Using Marxist assumptions, she argues that while identity is usually ascribed to be the core concept around which members of community are attached and detached, capitalism and modernity are the major reasons for having a community. “Communal subjectivity”, is thus constituted by practices of production and consumption. To invoke community is to raise “questions of belonging and power” (xxiii). Although Salaam has no explicit or implicit capitalist interest, its very formation is based on a late capitalist context. Joseph’s argument points to the impossibility of dislocating capitalism and modernity, in both cultural and economic senses, from Western discourses of community. The politics of queer identity is a product of social and historical processes that are shaped to a large extent by capitalist systems, which in turn re-produce and re-construct Salaam like other similar identity-based communities.

Hegemonic discourses of community, as Joseph (2002) asserts, dislocate community as the “other” of modernity and capitalism and this spatially distinguishes community from society and marks borders between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (society and community, respectively). Instead of being oppositional, Joseph argues that capitalism enables that link between society and community. Communities, to her mind, are capitalist formations or “the relation between community and capital is supplementary” (2002:1). However supplementary, Joseph asks for a re-reading that sustains the discontinuities between community and capital, thus highlighting other possibilities where the two are not continuous or merely complementary to each other in a stable system.

Sarah Ahmed and Anne-Marie Fortier (2003) share a similar point of view to Joseph’s de-romanticization of communities. They criticize the notion that community
usually invokes a sense of communality and togetherness. They call for new conceptualizations of communities that are based not only on communality and commonality, but also on difference. Communities are spaces where groups draw boundaries between “we” and “them”, while remaining open to others who are not like “our” kind or who “have nothing in common” with “us” (2003:251-2). A community, they argue, should promise a “living together without ‘being as one’ in which ‘otherness’ or ‘difference’ can be a bond rather than a division” (Ahmed and Fortier 2003:252).

In “re-imagining communities” Ahmed and Fortier focus on the questioning of “promise or threat” of community, the kind of subjects it produces, and forms of attachment, within and without a community (2003:254). Communities, as they re-imagine them, are “never fully achieved, never fully arrived at even when ‘we’ already inhabit them” (ibid). Therefore, they propose to think of community “as a site lived through the desire for community rather than a site that fulfils and ‘resolves’ that desire” (257). Such re-imagining promotes a further examination of the relationship between ideal and everyday life. Communities become spaces where subjects share material as well as symbolic grounds of commonality, difference, wishes and reality. Thus, one can argue that communities are spaces of dialectical transformations, where things happen only in relation to their ‘others’.

Ahmed’s and Fortier’s concept of ‘re-imagining’ communities sets a flexible theoretical framework for understanding the concept of community in general, and in the example of Salaam in particular. The ground of commonality in Salaam is not fully based on similarity or on difference, and what binds Salaam as a group is dialectical and
transformative according to different contexts. It is a group that is based on identification with Islam, in relation to the notion of umma, yet it differs from umma by its emphasis on shared political rather than religious commonality. The limits of Ahmed’s and Fortier’s notion of community can be illustrated by Salaam. Although Salaam aims to be as inclusive as possible, embracing Muslims, non-Muslims, queers and non-queers, and religious and non-religious people, Salaam still holds its members under a shared “political” mission. This political mission is directed towards the queer community, challenging its secular and Western hegemony, towards the Muslim community, challenging mainstream traditional Islam, and finally towards the larger community in Canada, challenging stereotypes about Muslims not being queer or queer being anti-religion.

Fran Tonkiss (2003) investigates the strong linkages between the emergence of communities and city life. Like Joseph, who links capitalism to community formations, Tonkiss claims that urban capitalist cities have always been a primary site for communities, as opposed to mainstream ideas that (re)present modern cities as sites of alienation, isolation and anti-communal life. Thus, it is mainly in such modern and urban settings that communities are constantly constructed, imagined and re-imagined (ibid:297).

Similar to Ahmed and Fortier, Tonkiss brings non-material arguments to the understanding of community. Language of community, she says, can provide an idiom for the gathering together of identities and for the fantasy of collective personality, of marking difference and indifference (Tonkiss 2003:297). In framing community, she
continues, the spatial and the social are continually overlaid such that particular spaces might generate social ties or vice versa. Thus, a notion of community can both enfold forms of diversity in the city and yet hold relative homogeneity along class, ethnic or cultural lines (2003:299). So although Salaam’s notions of communitarian belonging aims at broadening shared and different identities, it nonetheless holds a relative homogeneity in the identification of Islam and queer. This inevitable commonality exemplifies Ahmed’s and Fortier’s argument regarding the limits of community being based only on difference; by being defined as “communities”, all communities are exclusive, and it also shows that the notion of community is always being worked on but never fully achieved. This work of sustaining communities is what enables them to transform and remain unfixed.

Communities are not separated from the larger society; neither are they merely realistic projects nor imaginary ones. Lavie and Swedenburg (1996) use the notion of borderzones to explain positionings of alienation and marginalization of identities of diasporic peoples. I attempt to use this notion in order to present Salaam as a community that constantly re-imagines notions of belonging, identity and politics, and as a community that is constantly negotiating its borders with the wider Muslim and queer communities.

A model of borderzones calls for a theoretical conceptualization of a third time-space between two types of identities: identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:13). A third-space model is unfixed and not based on binary oppositions. Theoretically, it is a form of deterritorialization that occurs both to
and between the delimited political realities of the “First World” and the “Third World”. A third time-space is an imaginary “homeland” where “the fragmentation of identity” is conceived not “as a kind of radical anarchic liberation but...as a recognition of the importance of the alienation of the Self in the construction of forms of solidarity” (1996:16). By “fragmentation of identity”, Lavie and Swedenburg refer to minority constituencies across disjunctive and differential social positions and the way such minorities are mobilized and enabled to build coalitions. Thus, the third time-space is a space of creativity, affirmation and community” (ibid).

Living on borderzones is often experienced as being trapped in an impossible in-betweenness, such as the example of Franco-Maghrebis who are denied the option of identifying with either France or Algeria (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996:15). Similarly, I would argue Salaam is located in this borderzone where its members are denied full identification with Islam or queer. The third time-space seeks to frustrate frontierization to make the gaps between identity and place unmendable. It is the space of the borderzone, between identity-as-essence and identity-as-conjuncture, that seems to resist institutionalization.

Similar conditions that set the liminality of Salaam’s positioning enable it to reconfigure ‘home’ and ‘exile’ to be on the borderzones. Being a diasporic community, of diasporic subjects, the question of ‘origins’ and ‘destiny’ and of belonging to ‘home’ and belonging to ‘exile’ become important. Salaam’s transference and reshaping of Muslim holidays reflects a desire of being ‘at home’ by bringing ‘home-like’ images and scenery into exilic spaces. Since, for some members, the possibility of going to their
homeland country is unlikely to occur, and for many, celebrations with their families in the diaspora are reinforcements of social exile, Salaam becomes one of the few spaces where such exilic feelings might be reduced. Salaam in this sense is a community-space; not only a community in terms of a gathering of members or of commonality in identification, and not just a space in terms of a physical fixed space: Salaam does not have a place of its own (i.e. office or centre). It is a community-space in its practice and production of imagined familiar settings and scenery that keeps radically shifting in their performances. On the one hand, Eid celebrations construct momentary spaces and images that resembles ‘homes’ that are left behind. On the other, queer dancing night parties construct queer images of “never” exited homes. These two spaces overlap so that Muslim celebrations become queer celebrations; when they deconstruct gender boundaries and emphasize sexual identity, the notion of ‘home’ becomes rather vulnerable and momentary. Such homes are one time-events that dissolve when the members of the community separate or when the activity is over and the reality of diaspora and exile interrupts the imaginary ‘homes’.

The swinging between realities of ‘homes’ and ‘exiles’ and the imagination of ‘homes’ and ‘exiles’ position Salaam on the borderzone through moments of belonging and moments of alienation, times of construction and deconstruction of homes, and moments of belonging. There are complicated relations to overseas homelands, and the reality of migration and diasporic life often reinforces feelings of homelessness and constant nomadism.
Salaam: A Community of Shared Differences

Toronto is a fertile ground for the emergence of various “multicultural” communities. A central trend in this “multicultural” scene (described earlier) in Toronto is the fragmentation of communities into small and bounded communities (creating essentialized identity-based communities like ‘the Muslim queer community’ or ‘the South-Asian women and trans queer group’). It is, thus, not surprising to see in the Toronto scene a group like Salaam, coming from both wider Muslim community and the queer communities. It is also not surprising to see how such a community intentionally or unintentionally creates a third-space community which locates itself in dialectical relations between the two communities. In speaking of dialectics, I do not refer to two supposedly opposing or contrasting entities; rather, it is two singular entities, which may or may not share some commonalities and differences, yet one may transform its relation to the other and vise versa. Since this thesis is not about the wider Muslim or queer communities, I shall only focus on Salaam’s location within these communities.

The relation Salaam has with the Muslim diasporic community in Canada is limited. Most interviewees from Salaam told me that the only real contact Salaam has with the Muslim communities in Canada is through the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC)\textsuperscript{20}, Naser, founder of Salaam, was also the secretary general of MCC. Although the majority of Salaam members want to work on outreach to the diverse Muslim communities in the city, there are no programs offered by the group to achieve this goal.

\textsuperscript{20} www.muslimcanadiancongress.org
The events that are mainly proposed already assume that the people who will attend would be either queer or queer-friendly, like the queer parties, or the other activities, such as religious celebrations, that would (only) attract progressive Muslims. Thus, the activities are rarely directed to a confrontational meeting with homophobic or traditional Muslims. On the queer scene level, Salaam also avoids confrontational relations. There are also no explicit attempts to co-sponsor an event with other non-Muslim queer groups in Toronto.

In 1991, Salaam-Toronto was formed as a social support group, by Naser. In 1993, few people had interest in participating in the group, so it was closed down. It was only in 1999 that Salaam came back, but this time as part of Al-Fatiha, the Muslim queer community in the United States, under the name Al-Fatiha Toronto. In 2000-2001 the group reclaimed its name and established what is now known as “Salaam, the Queer Muslim Community”. Salaam defines itself as:

“A Muslim identified organization dedicated to social justice, peace and human dignity through its work to bring all closer to a world that is free from injustice, including prejudice, discrimination, racism, misogyny, sexism, homophobia and transphobia.”

(http://www.salaamcanada.org/intro.html).

Issues of Islam and queer identities emerge in all Salaam’s activities and they become the main identifying aspect of the community. Salaam’s activities can be divided into four categories and each type of activity is designed to produce different forms of attachment to Muslim identities, queer identity and diasporic or exilic identities, all of
which produce new senses of identifications such as “queer Muslim” or “diasporic queer” that would not have existed in other contexts.

The first type of activity is the queer Muslim support group meeting once a month to talk about “hard stuff”, as they indicate in their website. Most participants in the support group meetings are new immigrants who have been in Canada for less than four years. Their main concerns are around issues of migration bureaucracy, adapting to the Canadian society, language barriers, ‘paradoxes’ in being queer and Muslim, difficulties in leaving home, and ‘outing’ concerns. Most people who come to support meetings are “in the closet” in terms of their families in Canada or in the country of origin. In that sense, Salaam acts as a mediator between Muslim queer newcomers and the larger Canadian society.

Second, Salaam facilitates non-religious communal activities, such as participating in the Toronto’s Pride parades or organizing night parties. Lately Salaam has changed the name of its night fundraiser parties from Salamania to Kus-kus parties. While the name ‘Salamania’ results from a combination of Salaam and mania, in the meaning of madness or passion for Salaam, the new naming of their fundraiser parities suggests a sexual and oriental shift. Kus-Kus resonates the word “cuscus” which refers to a North-African and Middle Eastern dish (more generally associated with Morocco), thus producing an exotic African or Middle-Eastern image. The other meaning of Kus-Kus is less explicit; the word “kus” in Arabic is used as a derogatory word for “vagina”. The choice of the word Kus-kus was not arbitrary. In a discussion with the coordinating group via email, one member indicated that the word “kus-kus” is “catchy” and “simple”, and for non-Salaam
members it does not sound “too ethnic while still hinting at (Salaam’s) cultural ties” since, after all, it refers to a Middle-Eastern dish. Only two members pointed to the fact that the word also connotes a derogatory meaning of vagina, but not necessary in a problematizing sense or even suggesting another naming that is not problematic in terms of gender politics. Thus, eventually the name was picked up.

The spaces produced through Kus-Kus parties or Toronto’s Pride parade are not religious. Salaam, as a community, is there as another ethnic group that is a participant in the “multicultural” and queer scene in Toronto. Islam, in these events, is transformed into a cultural and ethnic identity that is performed and staged through various activities such as Middle-Eastern belly dancing performances and South-Asian dance performances. In a sense, such events and scenes reproduce the general practices of other queer communities; what distinguishes Salaam queer parties from others is the type of performances and music they choose. Participation in the Toronto Pride Parade and holding parties has been criticized by some progressive Muslims, as well as queer Muslims. One controversy was around a Salaam member marching in the parade semi-nude. As one member told me in an interview, the group’s main concern was how Salaam can march under the religious connotation of the “Muslim community”, and have an almost nude man marching as part of it. What kind of image does this performance imply and does Salaam have limits as a Muslim community, were main questions that were debated. In the end, it was accepted that the man showed up and performed in his own way. The other controversy that Salaam members keep questioning is their relationship with alcohol served at Salaam’s parties. This mainly comes as a criticism from people
who conceive themselves to be progressive Muslims, yet also want to set limits on accepted “behaviour” in Salaam’s activities. An example was brought up by Naser, who told me that a woman who is considered a progressive Muslim, and was not bothered much by us being Muslim and queer surprisingly criticised the fact that “we hold parties and we sometimes have meeting in bars where we drink alcohol”. In these incidents Salaam confronted objections and pushed the limits of who is a “good Muslim” or even what a “Muslim” is; however, these confrontations are usually marginal and they do not challenge the larger Muslim Canadian communities.

Third, Salaam reproduces religious spaces through practices of Muslim observance such as Iftar (breaking of fast in the holy month of Ramadam), and Friday prayers and Zikirs (remembrance of God). Such religious practices are dialectical to queer modalities and identifications; they are transformed through queer practices. Although Salaam’s performances of Muslim holidays structurally resembles those of non-queer Muslim practices, such as initiating events by specific prayers, the content and interpretations are different. The difference lies in Salaam’s project of “queering” Islam and producing spaces of “absolute” or full identification that are based on both Islam and queer principles, examples include performing prayers with no gender segregation, no religious or “humble” clothes (for women, head cover, and long skirts (or a hijab) and for men long trousers) and women calling for Azan and leading the Salat. An important aspect of the religious activities is the reproduction of home in an exilic setting and the production of Muslim-queer diasporic practices. It is significant for Salaam to create queer practices
of Islamic observances apart from other Muslim communities in order to construct an imagined ‘ideal’ home that embraces queer and Islam.

Fourth, Salaam acts as a political group that advocates social change and initiates conferences on issues of Islam and queer, which may take place with the co-operation of other Muslim queer communities transnationally (for example the Al-Fatiha Foundation in the U.S). In fact most members of Salaam identified Salaam and Al-Fatiha conference in 2001 as the point of departure of the group. Many members who participated in that event claimed that it was the most central event in Salaam’s history, since the community was formed around this conference, and it also turned Salaam into a visible community in the Muslim and the queer scene in Toronto.

Immediately after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Salaam became more popular among many queer Muslims in Toronto. After 9/11 the non-Muslim world became more interested in Islam, as there were attempts to make links with terrorism and Islam such as when George W. Bush declared that the world was divided into the good people, those who are with “us” and the evil people, those who are “against us”. Many Muslim people, world-wide, felt the need to reintroduce their religion as peaceful and link the 9/11 attacks to political-economic causes. Many Muslims reconnected with their religion as a form political resistance to general anti-Muslim attacks, as some Salaam members told me. In a post 9/11 world, many queer Muslims joined Salaam hoping to reclaim their sense of identity and produce an understanding of Islam that was counter to critical discourses of Islam.
Most of Salaam’s members came as immigrants to Canada. The majority of those who migrated came without their families, and the minority came with their families at a very young age. The fact that the vast majority of the group did not live their childhood in Canada shapes to a large extent Salaam’s practices, ideology, notions of attachments to ‘origins’ or lives and experiences in the ‘diaspora’. However, the politics behind Salaam’s formation and the importance of its existence in the “multicultural” context invites many non-Muslim queers or non-queer Muslims and others to join Salaam or participate in its events for political reasons, such as solidarity with progressive Muslims and queer Muslims, as a Jewish filmmaker in Toronto once told me when we met at one of Salaam’s activities during the month of Ramadan.

In my interviews and fieldwork with Salaam members, I found four categories of identification based on Muslim and queer identities. Such categories form the diversity or differences (Ahmed and Fortier 2003) upon which this community is based. In this sense, such diversity makes bonds and boundaries of Salaam wider on the one hand and fragmented on the other hand, so that some members only know one aspect of the community. For instance some members would only be part of the support group, but never attend any visible ‘queer’ activities like the pride parades or parties, while others would never be part of the support group, general meetings or religious observations but would attend Salaam’s queer parties. In this, Salaam is a community that stands on commonality, but functions within layers of shared differences.

The first category of belonging to Salaam includes those who have always been identified as queer but were not attached to their Muslim identity, culturally or
religiously. Their interest in Salaam grew due to increasing identification with their Muslim identity, especially after 9/11 attacks. Samer, self-identified as an Arab-Muslim queer, was born and raised in Jordan and migrated to Canada five years ago. He explained to me how he joined Salaam:

When I first came [to Toronto], I already knew about Al-Fatiha, and I knew about it from a mailing list of queer Arabs, and I didn’t like this religious name “Al-Fatiha”\textsuperscript{21}. I also knew about Salaam, but I didn’t want the Muslim connotation. So here, I worked with immigrants and I wanted to interview El-Farouk with the issue of immigration and he pushed me to join the group. It was Al-Fatiha then, and he said: “come to our group see how it is”, and that was it. Shortly after 9/11, I joined Salaam and it fit my ideas. So we changed [the name] to Salaam\textsuperscript{22}, that talks about human rights, dignity and feminism, themes which attracted me more.

Samer, told me that he always identified more with an Arab identity; only recently did his Muslim identity become important and now he identifies himself as Muslim, culturally and ethnically:

I stopped calling myself as a Muslim a long time ago...But after I came to Canada, and after 9/11, things changed in my head in terms of my identity. 9/11 made me move to the place where people see me as an Arab, as a terrorist. I was always proud about my Arab or Jordanian identity, but the Muslim one came back. I have to think, do I say ‘I am not a Muslim and I don’t care’, change my name to Sam, like many people do. Or do I acknowledge who I am and what are my heritage, culture and family. How can I betray all my history?

The Muslim identity is central to the very formation of Salaam, especially post 9/11. The queer identity is also central to the definition of the community. In fact, the framework of Salaam emerged from a queer context, not a Muslim one, back in the early 1990s. However, in the interviews, I found Salaam members talking about the

\textsuperscript{21} Al-Fatiha is the first verse in the Qur’an.
\textsuperscript{22} Salaam means peace in Arabic and has no direct connotation to Islam.
complexities of their Muslim identity more than their queer, sexual or gender identities. They were attracted to the idea of being Muslim as a cultural, political and religious identity more than being queer; what fascinated them in Salaam was finding a queer Islam, rather than finding queers who happen to be Muslims.

The second category of people who joined Salaam are those who were already connected to their Muslim identity in terms of religion and culture, and wanted to connect to their queer identity; thus, their interest in Salaam became more focused on the project of queering Islam. Aminah has lived for more than ten years in Toronto, and identifies herself as a Muslim lesbian. Aminah grew up in East Africa in a South Asian Muslim religious family. She has for a long while identified herself as a Muslim Shi’ā\(^{23}\) and although she is not a devoted member of Salaam, for her, the community is a site where she can celebrate the existence of both identities together:

I remember meeting [Naser] in an anti-war demonstration and he was the one who started talking to me about bringing more women in Salaam. I remember myself, as Muslim and queer, I didn’t see many others except for Irshad Manji\(^{24}\), whom I have no patience with. When I went to the first Salaam general meeting it was all men, and I was sort of forced to go. I remember [Naser] was dragging me to come but I didn’t want to. I understood that for a lot of people it was a way for meeting and forming solidarity but I wasn’t in a place where I needed that. I liked the people I met, and I think we started socializing but informally and we started meeting in each others houses…I think I never joined Salaam. I went to one meeting, I didn’t want to continue, but I liked the people a lot, it was nice, the Arabs and Indians and Muslims…it was a community of other migrants.

Referring to Salaam’s religious activities, Aminah told me:

\(^{23}\) Shi’ā are major denomination in the Islam.
\(^{24}\) Irshad Manji is a Canadian queer Muslim; she is the author of The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith (2003).
I liked the queering up of the practices. [...] What is good about Salaam, is that [my partner] who has never been in a Muslim space, she was able to be in a Muslim space as a dyke and as my partner, and she saw Muslim practices different from the one I was used to. She was introduced to Islam in a very queer way.

Different from the first and second category, the third group of people who join Salaam either do not identify as Muslims, or Islam is not a large part of their identity, but they are intensely involved with queer activism. For them, Islam in Salaam is a cultural and political issue that has its own unique position within the wider queer community. Ranya, a Palestinian lesbian born to a Muslim family who lived throughout the Middle East, came to Toronto as a landed immigrant a year ago, and recently returned to Jordan. I met Ranya during the Salaam march in the Toronto Pride Parade in 2005. Ranya identifies herself as secular and when I asked her about the reason she joined Salaam, she answered:

I have a friend in Jordan. He is my first friend I came out to [referring to Samer]. Actually he told me about the group [Salaam] last year, before pride, and I laughed and said: ‘why are you in a Muslim group?’ He said he that was not religious; he is even more secular than me. He said it is more of a culture. So, I came to the pride last year and I marched with everyone. Many are affected by Muslim culture, so it is not religious at all. I went to the first support meeting. It was good. They talked about religious issues, but it was more of support. I am influenced by Muslim culture; that is why I joined Salaam. [...] Salaam came as division of Al-Fatiha in the U.S. and I heard a lot about Al-Fatiha and it always made me laugh, because I never understood how someone can still be a Muslim and queer.

Ranya’s friend, Mark, self identified as FTM transgender, was born in the Middle East and came to Canada to acquire higher education. Mark now lives in Toronto and is a Canadian citizen. He is a Christian Arab and he identifies as a believer in God. He told
me that he joined Salaam since he always lived in a Muslim culture and for him Salaam is a cultural and political queer group:

I identify more with [Muslim] Arabs than with Western Christians, because I was raised in an Arab-Islamic society. The basics of Islam are influenced by our society and cultural practice. So, I would identify with queer Muslims more than queer Christians...I fast in Ramadan, like my friends fast in our [Christian] Lent. Food, culture and social behavior of Arabs [both Christians and Muslims] are the same.

Both Ranya and Mark see their participation in Salaam as political, and they find Salaam a vital community within the mosaic of “multiculturalism” in the queer community, although leaving the religious-Muslim part of Salaam untouched or unworked.

The last type of people who are attracted to Salaam are those who have always been religious Muslims, but have troubles with their queer identity and with the combination of both aspects in their lives. Most of these people I met through the support groups and the general meetings. It is also important to note that the majority in this group are new immigrants to Canada and they participate in Salaam’s activities and meetings in order to acquire more knowledge about resettlement, social and cultural issues, the health system or anything else related to everyday life in a new reality and new country. Generally speaking, Salaam members who immigrated on behalf of their sexual experience tend to conceptualize Salaam in sense of space of refuge or home.

Omar migrated from Bangladesh four years ago, and recently he became a citizen of Canada through a sexual refugee claim. When I asked him how he got to know Salaam, and how he became an active part of it, he replied:
I was very puzzled and shy. I don’t know where to go and what to do...I didn’t know where Church St. is, and I was shy to ask people about any gay community, let alone to find a Muslim gay community. I didn’t have an idea that Toronto is heaven for gays. I found Church St. and I just found this magazine and there was an interview with a Muslim guy and he told his story, and at the end of the article his name was there and his telephone number and I called him. That’s how I got into Salaam, when that time Salaam wasn’t Salaam but Al-Fatiha, in 2001.

Khaled, who was born in the Middle East and lived in various countries, finally found himself a place to settle in Toronto. His migration to Canada was to a large extent related to his frustration from living “in the closet” back home. Now being partly ‘out’, except to his own diasporic community in Canada, his main concern is how to negotiate the gap and the symbolic distances between being ‘out’ here and ‘in’ the closet in his country of origin. Salaam for him was a space where he could touch base and find comfort in being surrounded by a community of queer Muslims:

When I found out about Salaam I just went. It was great because I found people who can listen and I can speak my mind. I find that helps other people to come out from their shells and speak, that’s what the support group is about: to speak and to say what’s on your mind. I am really glad that I came to the support group meetings, because it exposed me to the reality of my religion and my situation. I was closeted and didn’t face the fact that I was Muslim and gay, and [joining Salaam] changed my conception of being Muslim and gay.

The formation of Salaam, as the interviews imply, was based on diverse reasons of attachments, some religious, some political and some queer; thus, it is a community based on negotiating and embracing difference. It is not necessarily a community based on a combination of two identities but rather on several options and combinations of identifications.
Conclusion

The Muslim queer community in Toronto exists within various intertwined contexts and conditions. Being a Muslim queer group, Salaam is situated in a liminal space between different supposedly unrelated concepts: queer and Muslim. In attempting to meet both concepts, Salaam holds a borderzone position where it is not a Muslim community without a queer identity, and not fully a queer community without being Muslim. This condition is typical of diasporic communities where people’s identifications and conceptualizations of their lives are fragmented into several national, geographic, sexual, ethnic or religious divisions. In this chapter I argued for a contextualization of Salaam within the wider Muslim and queer communities in a context of discourses of “multiculturalism”. I argued that Salaam is a product of discourses of diversity, “multiculturalism”, capitalism and diaspora. Salaam’s awareness of self-exoticization, as the example of the naming of Kus-Kus parties implied, and its creation of a safe space where it can celebrate Muslim holidays in an alternative manner, are enabled by the hegemonic discourses of tolerance and diversity in the city. Yet such discourses limit Salaam’s creativity when they confine it to a quest for authenticity and originality; these same discourses contribute to Salaam not being fully assimilated by one community or another.

In this chapter I also introduced the way Salaam highlights its different spatial activities, arguing that such diversity exemplifies Salaam’s foundation of diverse
identification. Some activities are religious, creating Muslim spaces where queer identity is central and some are more social, creating queer spaces where Muslim identification is welcomed. And in both spaces the new contextualized concept of “Muslim-queer” is located on the borderzones. Islam is not transformed into a new religion, nor is queer transformed into a non-secular modern identification.

Salaam has minimum association with the larger Muslim communities in Canada and with the notion of Muslim *umma*. It rarely holds events that invite all Muslims since their events assume a queer-friendly atmosphere, which many Muslims in Canada might see as foreign. Similarly, their queer events limit participants to Muslim queers since they are mainly of interest to Muslims.

Members of Salaam share commonality in being ethnically, nationally and/or religiously diasporic “Muslims”, yet people who joined Salaam did so for different interests and identifications. Some wanted to connect to their Muslim ‘origin’ in a cultural-political manner, especially after the 9/11 attacks. Others wanted to take part in a project to turn Islam into a queer-friendly identification. Others claimed that the reason they are interested in Salaam is not religion but the experience of being culturally and socially different, and do not consider themselves Muslims in terms of religiosity. Finally, some members of Salaam joined the group as their only social support recourse in a diasporic reality in a new country.

Thus, diversity in identifications and practices all become Salaam’s recourse that helps it in producing and reproducing its own image and character. It is a community that is carefully producing spaces which are conflicted but not fully reaching a ‘real’
confrontation that might “blow-up”, as Lavie claims (1996).
CHAPTER THREE

Muslim Diasporic Queer Positioning and the Configuration of Homes

Ranya and Samer, both members of Salaam, had recently migrated from Jordan to Toronto to live their lives ‘out’ as queer in the city. Samer told me that many people, including his family, knew about him being gay, and although his life in Jordan was not in danger because of that, he still wanted to live outside Jordan. He moved to Toronto in 2001 and he currently lives in the heart of the Gay Village, where he feels most at home. Ranya, a Palestinian Jordanian also moved from Amman to the city of Toronto in 2004. She, as opposed to Samer, is not out to her family who lives in one of the Gulf countries and only some of her queer friends in Jordan know that she is a lesbian. Similarly to Samer, she moved to live in the Gay Village, in Toronto, as part of experiencing the queer life in the city. Samer and Ranya consider Toronto as well as Jordan as their home. They claim that there are always multiple homes that one can belong to.

Khaled, who is a member of Salaam, lived in several countries through his life. His family fled a war in his homeland, and he remembers his childhood as continuous displacements. Finally, his family settled in one of the Gulf countries while he continued to move. He moved to study in Europe for several years, then he returned to the Gulf, and in 2002 he migrated to Canada. He told me that after experiencing a lot of displacements

25 Khaled asked me particularly not to mention any specific information about his country of origin, as he fears ‘outing’ in his ethnic-national community in Canada.
he feels now settled in Toronto, a city he calls home. Similarly to Samer and Ranya, Khaled asserts that the reason behind his migration to Toronto is partly to accomplish his desire to live a queer life and be ‘out of the closet’.

Nadiyah was born in Canada to a Persian mother and a Pakistani father. She lived in the suburbs of Toronto with her family, and she recalls unpleasant experiences being raised in a White-Christian school where her Islam always “left her an outsider”. Her movement from her childhood ‘home’ to the city was a moulding experience that shaped her political identification and activism. Nadiyah remembers her childhood as living in an alienated reality with an immigrant family who lived in predominantly White neighbourhoods. She moved to live in downtown Toronto for her education, and being in an ethnically diverse city she could find herself a space where she can be politically involved in the Muslim queer community. Nadiyah, as well as other Salaam members who spent most of their childhood in Canada, talks about the feeling of alienation from the “White Canadian” society and culture and the racisms they face, especially after the 9/11 attacks on the United States.

Stories of queer migrations are stories of ‘self realization and reflexivity’ and the narratives of moving out and coming out of the closet form a version of a ‘rite of passage’ (Manalansan 2003:21), from being “in” the closet to becoming “out”. In this chapter I discuss five different narratives of queer migration, where I show how movements through time and space are central to the constitution and relocation of marginalized queer positionings. Stories of queer Muslims’ migrations are stories of not only ‘self realization’ but also of political realization and constant reconstruction of the
concepts and experiences of ‘homes’ and ‘exile’. Stories of queer Muslims challenge the common argument in queer migration literature that queer migration is a form of “homecoming” and the idea that moving out of family homes is followed by the act of ‘coming out’ of the queer closet (Manalansan 2003, Marie-Fortier 2001, 2003 and Cant 1997). In the case of Muslim queers who are self identified as people of colour, migration is not an act of full departure from homes nor is it a full arrival to new ones, but rather of rethinking notions of belonging, homes and community. For many queer Muslims I interviewed ‘home’ is not centered in one location, whether at ‘origin’ or at ‘destiny’, and it is not fully accomplished. For many Muslim queers being queer is not the main experience of marginalization or displacement and in fact for those who live in the ‘Gay Village’ being queer is not an alienating experience, as it was before they migrated, but rather being a person of colour and a Muslim is. As they migrate to the city, many queer Muslims search for a queer visibility in the city, (‘The Gay Village’ is the first space they find as visibly queer), as they seek a reflection of their queer identity in the city.

Even though some Salaam members do not have immediate families in Canada, whom they do not want to be ‘out’ to, most members would rather be partially out of the closet so that they are not exposed to any other member of their diasporic communities in Canada, who have tight connections with their families in their countries of origin. Thus, ‘moving out’ of family spaces does not always imply a full ‘coming out’. Also the concept of ‘coming out’ for some Salaam members does not hold the same connotation in the Western queer discourse of being politically and socially proud and active of being
queer, and also being able to live honestly in an unthreatening anti-queer environment. As Manalansan (2003) argues, for Filipino gay men ‘coming out’ is an ‘American behavior’ rather than a part of Filipino gay culture. In the case of Filipino gay men, the experiences of moving out of one’s family homes, being forced into exile and becoming illegal somewhere else are more difficult; even more so, being displaced can be more of a constitutive experience than being accused of being a queer in the new reality of the city (ibid:33).

For many queers, urban exilic spaces are fertile sites for building new conceptions, new communities and even a new sense of selfhood, but also they are painful realities in which the quest for ‘home’ and belonging is constitutive of everyday experience. Exilic queer settings are spaces where queer politics can come into shape, as different from local mainstream (“White”) struggles. For many queer immigrants facing displacements, which might be traumatic, and engaging with resettlement are as important for the queer struggle as dealing with the socio-psychological effects of being queer, especially when the White-queer scene occasionally leaves people of colour as outsiders instead of showing solidarity with them (Manalansan 2003:69).

The stories that are presented in this chapter amplify voices of different queer struggle from the mainstream hegemonic queer struggle. They speak of the impossibility of centralizing sexuality in the experience of queer and rather decentralize it to expand on other components (displacements, exiles and racisms) that are constitutive of queers’ positionings. The stories also show how everyday life is a space for examining the creation and rearticulation of queer ‘selves’ and their relation to home in the diaspora.
This chapter explores five life stories of Salaam members' routes and journeys of belonging. It brings reconstructions of memories of homes that were left behind and reconstruction of new homes in the new reality of the city of Toronto. Following Anne-Marie Fortier (2001, 2003), I examine the argument that queer migration is a form of 'homecoming'. Through these interviews, I show how queer migration is imagined as 'homecoming' but experienced as 'not fully leaving home or arriving to new ones'. After they migrate looking for their safety and comfort in the new reality of exile, many queer Muslims find themselves reconstructing their origin as well as their destiny as potential spaces that they can call home. In other words, after leaving their 'unqueer' homes that excluded them, many queer Muslims in Salaam began to re-situate their homes, again, in their country of origin. Homes that were left behind became fragmentations of belonging and fragmentations of homes. Such new conceptualizations re-enforce a rethinking of being at-home and of not-at-home. Many Muslim queers, after coming to Canada, wish for a revisit or a return as a step towards testing their notion of belonging, partly because they have never (metaphorically) really left home and partly because many of them discover that they can belong to more than one home and that their queer identity is not entirely their only (de)constructive experience. They belong to different ethnic, national, religious or cultural communities; thus, their queerness turns out to be not enough of an element to make them feel identification with the Canadian-White queer culture. The formation of Salaam, which I talked about in chapter two, is an attempt to create this home-space community that goes beyond mainstream queer 'rainbow' culture (such as queer parties, sex shops or pride events) and rather deals with issues of migration,
(re)settlements and social, psychological and religious support. Hence, it is important to understand the following life stories and narratives within the context of both ethnic and queer diaspora.

Living in ‘exile’ triggers and destabilizes ideas of ‘homes’ in a contested manner that expands the understanding of both ‘exile’ and ‘home’. One of the main questions I ask is how experiences of movements and displacements reflect on the lives of queer Muslims in Toronto, and how memories of ‘childhood’ homes are transferred to the new reality in the queer ‘exile’. Although many queer Muslims who immigrate to Toronto imagine finding themselves at home in being ‘out of the closet’ in the city, they end up being caught in-between multiple belongings and homes, since, on the one hand, they do not want to give up their “origins” or their childhood-homes or family-homes as they all wish to visit their homes as queer, and, on the other hand, in Toronto, they reconstruct their surrounding as ‘homes’ again in exile. This condition makes queer Muslims’ lives a situation of liminality and a borderzone of homes and exiles, where their notions of home and exile are not fully left or arrived at respectively.

This chapter is divided into two sections; the first one presents three stories of Salaam members who came to Canada alone as part of their sexual and social “emancipation”. The stories are semi-divided into four themes that manifest the linkages between sexual positioning and notions of belonging. Each story talks about conceptions of sexual identity in spaces of ‘family homes’ and how such sexuality was forced to be relocated somewhere else. Relocating sexuality was linked to relocating one’s self and one’s home. Thus, the first theme deals with how thoughts about movements and
moments of departure came into shape. The second theme that follows is the narrative of ‘departure’ which brings the hesitations and the moments where ‘ideas’ of departure were formed along with the fear of displacement and loss (Georgis 2006). In such narratives homes are conceived as exile and imprisonments, and destinies, that are away from one’s home, are imagined as spaces of emancipation and are reconstructed as ‘homes’. The third theme is the moment of arrival. In the three stories that I present, moments of arrivals are conceived as moments of freedom yet also of marginalization and loneliness where ideas of belonging are re-thought and re-shaped. The fourth theme is the reconstruction of exile as home and the decentralization of essentialized home spaces back home and in the new reality.

The second section brings two stories of queer Muslims who lived most of their lives in Canada as second generation immigrants. The main narrative in these stories is about the social and symbolic displacement rather than physical, since they did not live a long time outside Canada. The main focus in these narratives was the experience of belonging to diasporic communities and having to justify or renegotiate one’s religious, queer, or ethnic identities. For those who immigrated to be queer somewhere away from their homes a central concern is ‘building’ or ‘finding’ homes. For those who lived most of their lives in Canada, ‘building’ a community is more important, since they constantly relocate their homes in their community and political involvement. They also have not tried living in a society other than Canada, so that for them Canada is a place that they mostly relate to as home.

The five stories that I present in this chapter were chosen on the basis of their
diverse gender, ethnic, religious and diasporic positionings. Naser, Aminah and Faridah have similar family histories and journeys being South-Asian and living in East and Central Africa. Omar is from Bangladesh and Khaled from the Middle-East. Except for Omar, these stories are of people who were born to already displaced and uprooted families. Aminah’s and Faridah’s stories bring up issues pertaining to gender differences and hierarchies in the experiences of Muslim women. Except for Faridah, all stories presented here are of people who explicitly identify as being religious (with different understanding of religiosity). Aminah follows the Shi’a faith while the others are identify as Sunni.

Queer identities are socially, historically and culturally constructed through the different contexts they exist in. This suggests that the conceptualization of identity of Muslim queers in Canada differs from that in their ‘original’ homes, where, as I found through the interviews, that discourses of sexual and gender identities assumes certain sexualities not to be part of people’s personalities (or selfhood). Rather, what is more central, in general, is the social positioning of human action more than the subjective or personal interpretation or identification. Stories and memories of many queer Muslims indicate that queer identities at home were primarily regarded as deviant sexual behavior and not as contested sociopolitical ones. According to most Salaam members, to be queer at ‘home’ or in ‘homelands’ is considered socially and religiously immoral. Therefore, the discourse of queer politics that views queer as an identity is marginal and the main concern for many queers becomes how to negotiate this sexually “immoral” and “dishonored” life-style with the values of a conservative society. In this sense, many
Muslim queers lead a 'double' life at their homes, where they have to hide most of their sexual concerns.

The everyday sexual identity struggles of Muslim queers who lived outside Canada and migrated to Canada seeking a queer life is different from those who were born or lived most of their lives with their families in Canada. Most queers in Salaam who came to Canada as part of their quest for sexual liberation talk about the negative conceptions of homosexuality 'back home' and the careful attempts to keep oneself in the closet. However, for those who came to Canada at a very young age or where born in Canada to Muslim families, their experiences and exploration of their sexual identity and their outing to their families were easier, partly because they have supportive resources that the larger queer community provides them with.

Most queer Muslims I interviewed went through diverse displacements in their lives before they settled in Canada. Some of Salaam members came with their families escaping conflict zones, revolutions or wars and others, who came alone, escaped conservative societies that do not acknowledge their style of life and identity. These displacements become a major factor in many Muslim queers’ lives, experiences and identifications. Thus, many Muslim queers I interviewed, went through multiple displacements, uprootedness and constant re-locations. Many queer Muslims, who migrated to Canada seeking queer life, live in a state of social exile where they were denied identity acknowledgment in their ‘homes’ in countries of origin, and where they were forced into conceptualizing immigration as homecoming. In such migrations, ‘coming out’ emerges as a unifying emphasis among many queers migrants, where such
emphasis enables them to share collectively some patterns of their lives as well as the experience of their migration (Cant 1997:3). In the new reality, many queer Muslims create for themselves a borderzone space between their loyalties to their Muslim or ethnic communities and to their queer community.

For most members of Salaam, life in Toronto is challenging. Those members who live in Toronto away from their families in their countries of origin face difficulties in resettlement, employment, health services, financial issues, dealing with a new country and new bureaucratic system and finding support from the queer community. Those members who lived their childhood in Canada talk about the alienation that they felt living in a Western society and the racisms they faced for being Muslim or non-White. Interviews in this chapter bring queer Muslims’ speculations of images of homes in exile and how homes are remembered and reconstituted in countries of origin and in Canada. In the following, I ask how members of Salaam relate to their realities outside of their society or communities, and how their reflections bring new understandings of the conceptions of homes and of exiles.

Since their lives are constantly moving, queer stories of arrivals and departure illustrates the ambivalence and liminality that those queer people live in. In such types of migration, Cant (1997) argues, queers seek to belong and attach to both worlds, the one before the transition and the other after it, and thus their inventions of identities and conceptualization of their notion of belonging is drawn on their relations to their “community of origin” and “queer community” (1997:1). In the case of Salaam, to follow Cant’s argument, new conceptualizations of identity were contested and reproduced
though the intermingling of Islam, queer, diasporic and ethnic identities, all of which are manifested in the very formation of Salaam and its practices and activities and through the narratives and stories of Salaam’s members.

Narratives of Muslim Queer displacements: Departures and Arrivals

Omar

“Dreaming of coming somewhere where homosexuality is acceptable”

Omar was the first Salaam member that I interviewed. I met Omar at my first meeting with Salaam that was held in a pub on Church Street, in “the Gay Village”, and then I kept seeing him at every Salaam event I attended. He is one of the most active members in Salaam. Omar organizes and facilitates Salaam’s general meetings and he is part of the Salaam’s virtual coordinator group that functions through an email listserv and where the large part of the group’s decisions is made. He also helps in the preparation of Salaam’s activities and events. I contacted Omar through Salaam’s general email list serve, which I am part of, and asked him whether he would like to be interviewed for this research. He agreed to the idea and invited me to his apartment for the interview. Like many other members in Salaam, Omar lives close to “the Gay Village”.

The interview with Omar was structured with questions that I had prepared in advance, but during the interview he took the questions to different directions and led me to other topics. The first question I asked him was: tell me about yourself, where are you from and why did you come to Canada? His answer started with India-Pakistan-
Bangladesh partition:

I wasn’t born in Canada. My story is quite long but I will make it short. I sometimes try to joke about it. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have a history of war and separation. 1947 India and Pakistan separated, then Pakistan become two: East and West, East Pakistan is Bangladesh. In 1971 we had a war with Pakistan and we separated, because we are two different separate geographic areas. The thing is that when I was born there was no country [in a laughing tone] they were fighting or something, so basically my family is from Bangladesh.

Omar grew up in a small city in Bangladesh in a Muslim conservative family. He described a very positive atmosphere at home, where women in his family are respected as opposed to what he used to hear from the imams in the mosques, that he found particularly offensive to women. Yet, the whole issue of homosexuality was always unspoken and taboo in his family, as well as the wider society. Omar’s experience with his sexuality started at an early age back in Bangladesh where he had a special relation with his best male friend; while also still having interest in girls:

I realized that I also like men and I am attracted to them. I wasn’t happy with that, because there was nothing natural in that. You know living in a society where we do not talk about sex, or even sexuality. But in college I started to get involved with my best friend in Bangladesh. We had this wonderful relationship, no sex or anything, it was more like we shared literature and we would talk together. We were in love with each other, but this was a difficult process. We had sex after a year and a half, but both of us didn’t know why we did that, and he claimed that this was unnatural and sick. But I started questioning that, why it was sick; it was a beautiful relationship! So, I started convincing myself that there was nothing wrong with it, and I started talking with him to open a dialogue but he was reluctant to talk. He wanted to get married.

The romance ended and Omar was left with lots of questions in his mind about the nature of such an ‘unnatural’ secret relationship. Then he decided to move to Singapore to complete his higher education. His sexuality became relocated and reconstructed in the
new reality of strangeness and alienation in a new country. Being displaced from his ‘own country’ enabled him to explore his (homo)sexuality:

When I was in Singapore I felt so happy and free. Because Singapore is somewhere in between: it is not a Western country and it is not my country. I started exploring it, even though I was staying with my cousin. I still had some restrictions: I couldn’t bring a friend home. I started school, and I started to explore the deeper meaning of homosexuality. [...] Meanwhile I started meeting people. I met Chinese guys and Indian guys, even Western guys. That was when I started dreaming of coming somewhere where homosexuality was acceptable. Because in Singapore our relationships were still underground, they had issues with their families so I started finding differences. I met this guy who was gay, and I started to realize that there was an underground homosexual activity in Singapore that nobody talked about. I started meeting people and I started learning where to meet people, like washrooms or parks, or shopping malls. [Emphasis added]

Although Singapore is not entirely a queer space or a queer-friendly space, being a stranger in a foreign country was good enough for Omar to allow him to experience his sexual desires. For him, this move to a place that was not “his country” is associated with sexual freedom, but not with conceptions of ‘coming out’ of the closet. In this case, the positioning of social strangeness enables his sexual liberation, but also triggers his reflexive thoughts about his positioning in a foreign country. Through his relationship with an American guy he met in Singapore, Omar was introduced to another foreign space where conceptualizations of homosexuality are different than his own. This is when he started imaging moving out to a place where “homosexuality is accepted”:

Here [in Singapore] I was dealing with being a religious Muslim, as my culture, my values, family values are all about man and woman and how natural this is. I started meeting people in a huge shopping mall. I met a guy from the States. I was very nervous and he was very cautious because he knew that in Singapore it was illegal and it might cause problems of imprisonment. So we started talking and started building a beautiful friendship. [...] He told me that he had a son. “How could you have son you are gay?” I asked. He said that in Western culture it was
different, a lesbian couple and [he] and [his] partner shared this baby together. He showed me a picture [of the son]. [...] Here a Western guy who showed me other things, he opened doors for me. [...] I started having sex with him. It took me lots of time to accept, it was a process and I always had this emotion or romanticism of having a man in my life.

Life outside of Omar’s reality, in a Western world, told by his American gay friend, made him very curious. He imagined the Western world as more hospitable to his homosexuality, and this is when he was introduced to new concepts of queer family or queer life, and started seriously to think about migration to the ‘West’. In these images the ‘West’ is reduced to queer life, and other issues of racism and alienation are not imagined.

"I just wanted to get out of home"

Coming back from Singapore, Omar became more curious to know about the same-sex scene in Bangladesh, which was constructed around heterosexual norms. Such relations were underground, like gay-prostitute parks in the cities. The gay scene in Bangladesh was invisible as opposed to how Omar imagined queer spaces in Western countries. Omar understood this problematic scene as linked to the high level religiosity in his society and culture:

There is a lot of gay life. I grew up there. And I do not have very good feeling about a society that is driven by a hundred percent religion. Men are segregated from women but there is mixing between boys and girls. I have witnessed the ugliness of guys sleeping with each other just for sex because they couldn’t have women to sleep with. The whole aura and culture is so frightening that no one would think of having the life of who they are. Many people came to have sex with me, but I realized that these are the people who are confused. I have seen when many young boys are taken advantage of. I have a friend who works for a
non governmental organization, and everybody is gay there. The organization is funded by Naz26 foundation from India and linked to England. This organization deals with AIDS, but it actually addresses gays. Many young boys are sex-workers for locals. There are many men who are married and gay and they go to the parks. My friend, who doesn’t know about me being gay, introduced me to this organization. [...] I started going with him and it was very scary. [...] He told me that the organization teaches these sex-workers about condoms and safe sex and deliver free condoms. It was shocking to me because these many boys don’t know what they are doing. When I asked them what kind of people come, they told me all these rich people; like ministers would take them to a hotel and some would be nasty and wouldn’t let them wear condoms because AIDS doesn’t exist in their country. It is “a White disease” [laughing]. [...] If I cannot live as an honest man in my country then I would rather go another country, I should live in a country which is more open. [Emphasis added]

Thinking back and forth about his life in Bangladesh, his life in Singapore and his future life somewhere else brought concerns about his queer identity and queer life in general:

There were gay people in my culture but they still wanted to get married. Sometimes I joke and say that till 1997 I was in dilemma to be or not to be, [...] I was thinking should I get married and have a family because I love kids. I had lots of relationships; an Australian man fell in love with me and then I wasn’t sure about who I was and what my sexuality was. My objective was that I needed to go somewhere where I felt happy and I felt that I am honest about myself. [Emphasis added]

Reflecting on his life back in Singapore and Bangladesh, Omar expresses his discomfort in being gay in a heteronormative environment and the symbolic violence that was produced from such heteronormative social constraints and this is when his thoughts about departure came into shape, as emphasized in the above quotes and expressed in the following:

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26 Naz Foundation in India: www.nfi.net
I was suffocated and puzzled [...]. I lived fighting myself, because it was so difficult to accept myself. [...] I was so afraid to show that I was gay. I didn’t accept myself. When I used to watch TV [with my family] and see a gay scene, I was afraid whether I said something or if my face expressed something. It was so tough. I suffered so much, day after day, so many nights I didn’t sleep thinking what was that! There is no one to give me any explanation.

The departure

Omar’s happiness and comfort is associated to spaces where his sexuality is acknowledged and accepted. Thus, moving out of his society and family spaces is imagined as finding one’s true self, or in other words, paradoxically, in spaces of strangeness Omar finds familiarity and comfort.

For many queers, as Cant argues (1997), migration is experienced as freedom while the family and its values are conceived as a prison. Thus many feel that they need to escape the shame of their ‘sexual deviance’ as perceived by many of their families. Away from this pressure, queers develop new lives in this new reality (1997:7) and new conceptions of memories that helps them relate to their past in a reconciling way.

Similarly, life in a Western world made Omar very curious. He imagined the West as more hospitable to queers, and through meeting Westerners he was introduced to new concepts of queer family or queer life, and started seriously to think about migration to the ‘West’.

After he finished his education in 2000, he returned to Bangladesh, where his sexuality was again closeted, and realized that he had to either follow his family’s wishes for a heterosexual life or his own desires for a homosexual one:

I went back [to Bangladesh]. As usual in a Muslim family they were after me

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about getting married... I was totally comfortable with my [homo] sexuality by that time. I didn’t understand how could I change the whole Muslim society.

Confronting his family seemed to Omar the more difficult option; the more realistic one was to move out of his country to somewhere else where he could feel at home in terms of his sexuality.

I didn’t think of confronting my family or coming out, rather I decided to go; I couldn’t face this truth. So I had to run away. I didn’t know where to go, but I have lots of friends, I have a good education and I speak English because in Singapore they speak this language. I had some money. I already finished my study. I had to look for a way to get away from my country. In a way it wasn’t clear for my family why I am leaving, but somehow I tried to make them understand that maybe I will come back and if I come back, I would get married. One of my friends helped me; he is in Great Britain and he had business in Canada, and he helped me apply for a Business Visa. I came here, without knowing what am I going to do and how I am going to make my life. I just wanted to get away from home and from everything. I came here alone, without knowing anyone, no friends and no family.

The decision to leave home and everything he had in his country of origin was not easy, yet he had no choice but to struggle for sexual-identity acknowledgment even at the price of being lonely in an alienated reality without family or friends. So, in 2000, his journey to Canada began, where he came as a complete stranger to a new inhospitable reality in which he felt lonely:

When I got here, it was very difficult. Before I arrived I stayed in London England. I had a friend and I stayed with him. I was insecure and not sure what I am going to do. I had some money, but I didn’t come as an immigrant. I had an idea that maybe I would start school and do my Masters degree. [...] I was in London for 10 days, I stayed with my friend I have lots of friends except in Canada. I started sending emails to my friends that I was going to Toronto and if anyone could help me find someone to pick me from the airport and stay with him for a day or so. While searching I found a link and one person recommended
someone and then someone let me stay at his place. I was very puzzled and shy; I didn’t know where to go and what to do.

*Exile, refugee, and memories of home*

After he had started to settle in Canada, Omar searched for the “gay community” or the “gay scene” in order to find a reflection of himself in the city. By coincidence, he found an article in a magazine about Salaam with a name and phone number to contact. So he contacted the person, and ever since Omar has been involved in the Muslim queer scene in the city.

A year after arriving in Canada, Omar started to be concerned about his status in the country since he was still on a business visa. He consulted a lawyer who advised him that the best way to be able to stay in Canada is through applying for a refugee status. He did so, yet the idea of being a refugee did not “appeal” to him:

The whole refugee issue didn’t sound very nice to me. I cannot even imagine that I will tell my family that ‘I am a refugee’, they wouldn’t accept me! Refugee...sounds like [hesitation]...you know I didn’t have any knowledge about that, because a refugee to me is someone who is being followed and thrown out of the country, and who doesn’t have his/her own home. Somehow I felt that it is something that does not apply to me... I still have this honour and family pride. I felt so bad, and I said [to my lawyer] ‘give me some time and maybe I will go to school and apply for immigration’. When I told my family they said “no, we are not going to give you money because you did not say that you are going to school, you said you are going for business and you said that you are going to come back and get married”. I didn’t argue with them. I said if you don’t want to support me I understand, since it involves lots of money. I didn’t have lots of options but to apply for a refugee status. [Emphasis added]

A refugee to Omar is someone “who doesn’t have his or her own home” it is someone who is forced into exile, thus has no country to return to. According to him, applying for
a refugee status indicates that he does not have a home although he insists that Bangladesh is still his home. Also, the fact that he had to apply for a refugee status, makes his family, whom he loves, appear oppressive and Canada, or the state, as his refuge. Being forced to feel like an exile at home or a refugee while one has a home was a difficult issue for Omar to face, which also made him feel demeaned and dishonored. Finally he had no choice but to apply for a refugee status. Yet, Omar told me in the interview, that the first thing he would do when he gets his Canadian passport is to get out of Canada and visit his family in Bangladesh, since as refugee he could not leave Canada before getting his citizenship.

Not being able to explain to his parents why he does not wish to return home and how he got his ‘Canadian’ citizenship, Omar’s relationship with his family is becoming tense and confrontational. His mother started to suspect that he might be gay and has left his family and his home to be living comfortably in a place that accepts his queerness:

They started to suspect. I had been here [in Toronto] for a long time and I told them that I applied for residency but I didn’t exactly tell them how I applied. They never raised the question. [...] Every time I called my mom she started crying and asking me: ‘why you are living there; you don’t have enough money to survive; you live like a beggar; come here you; don’t have to work; you would join the family business’. But I told her that I was happy here. She would ask why you were happy if you lived like a poor person. I would tell her that I am happy because I am happy and you are a mother and you should know. Then she said if it makes you happy it is good, but what about marriage? she would ask and I would tell her that I am not interested. I cannot tell her I am gay, first she wouldn’t understand and she would tell me to get married. That is how I deal with my family, and I wouldn’t come out to my family by phone, I would like to do it face to face.
In this dialogue with his mother, Omar hints that he would rather live in an economically insecure life and far from his family but being happy and content with his queer life and sexual desires. Omar’s family home in another country becomes an uncomfortable space to live in as queer. Here the notion of belonging and home is directly linked to Omar’s positioning of being denied acknowledgment and identity. His home in his space of origin feels like ‘exile’ in terms of not being able to feel at home, while other spaces outside of his origin and in a diasporic reality become desired as home.

In Canada, Omar faced a lot of challenges as a new immigrant with a limited amount of money and social resources. He also reflected back on his sad memories of the departure from his family, especially his mother, the feeling of being forced into exile because of the impossibility of expressing his feelings in his society, and the happiness in being somewhere where he can feel sexually “emancipated”.

When I arrived here [in 2000] I cried because this was very hard to leave everything behind. It was very painful when I left my home. [...] My mother knew that she was not going to see her son again. She cried and cried and she almost fainted. She was holding my hand she didn’t want me to go. It was very sad leaving all these things behind, I was so tired and clueless. But I was very optimistic because happiness was something that any human being would seek. I was sad to leave everything behind but I was happy to come here, meet someone and have all that I wanted. The first year in Canada was very sad. I lived in a basement. I did not have money to go out, and I needed to be cautious not to spend money. I had back pains and I couldn’t see the doctor. I cried and I was missing my family. Sometimes I would come to Church St. to meet a friend. [...] I was a luckier in the last two years, I got this beautiful place, I met [my partner] and I became Canadian. It took me longer than anyone else. I just got a letter that I am going to be a citizen, now I can travel; now I can visit my mom.
Ironically, the first wish Omar wanted to accomplish after getting his Canadian passport is leaving Canada to visit his family. Since he had on a refugee status he could not leave the country until his Canadian passport was issued.

Omar’s ideas of ultimate home and belonging changed again when he got to Toronto and after he chose to live in the ‘Gay Village’. He no longer associates his feeling of comfort to a queer scene and in fact Omar speaks about feeling of alienation from the White-masculine Church Street scene:

I didn’t feel home but I felt that everybody was gay. I used to go to a cafe and sit there, and I would see all these beautiful well dressed people with muscles, I was fascinated and intimidated and I felt that it was boring; they were trying to follow some kind of a repetitive pattern. I was disappointed. It shouldn’t be like this; if it was a place for everyone it didn’t have to be like this. Now I live close to Church St. but I don’t go there a lot, except when I want to meet my friends.

The visible queer scene in Church Street became invisible in Omar’s eyes because of the alienation he feels every time he passes by:

I come home from work tired and do not go there really. If I go there I go with a purpose, like Salaam meetings. I don’t see Church St. I don’t witness it, I don’t connect myself there, I don’t walk or dress or look gay, I don’t fit in there. I am not in this ‘showoffness’. Maybe I am not that handsome, but I get hit on by many people who show interest, but not on Church St. I have other friends who adapt easily to the gay culture; they feel very alienated when they go to the Church St. […] The only thing you always regret is what you left behind. I didn’t come here young; I came here when I lived half of my life somewhere else; I left half of my life behind. I came to an alien society. I feel that this is alien, not me. But I enjoy the city, I love the city.

Although Omar came to Canada in order to relocate his space of belonging and his home in a queer scene and feel comfort in being ‘out’, such a queer scene is not enough to build these feelings of belonging. On the contrary, Omar expresses his feelings of alienation
from such a scene and that he does not feel that he ‘fits’ this ideal prototype of a
Canadian gay man, even though he feels that he is perceived as attractive, paradoxically,
outside the “Gay Village”, where the mainstream White gay men’s scene is associated.

Omar’s relation to the reality of queer exile, of being forced to live ‘out’ outside
of one’s ‘home’, is complex. On the one hand he enjoys the queer scene and the fact that
he can have new conception of home outside his origins, on the other hand, old homes
that he left behind are remembered as loss although they were left because they were not
 hospitable for his self identification. Omar’s migration is not merely one of
‘homecoming’ but of constant ‘home-searching’. For him, home is always multiple, both
Bangladesh and Toronto are spaces that Omar calls home, since he never really left his
home behind nor had he arrived at a new home, but both are sometimes spaces of home
belonging and other times are not. Each home is contextualized and contested through the
positioning of his queer identity and ethnic-religious identity.

**Khaled**

*Multiple displacements*

The journey of queers is a journey of self and home searching. Khaled’s multiple
displacements happened before his “queer journey” took place. He was born in a conflict
zone in the Middle East. At a very young age his parents become refugees in Europe and
the Middle East so that he had to spend his childhood in several countries with his
uprooted family. Finally, after continuous movements, his parents settled in one of the
Arab Gulf countries. Living as a non-citizen in the Arab Gulf where education for
foreigners is extremely expensive, Khaled had to seek education in an East European country, where he spent another eight years of his life far from his family, culture or homeland. He returned to his family ‘home’ after a long absence to find out that he could no longer detach his (homo)sexuality from his being or his identity. For him, there was no option of living in denial in his family home and their conservative society. Finally, Khaled decided to leave for Canada with the ‘excuse’ of seeking education, while what he really wanted was to search for another space for himself, where his homosexual identity would be accepted and where he could get stability through the other citizenship. Khaled currently lives in Toronto and he is an active member of Salaam. He facilitates a large part of the support group meetings and participates in the preparations for Salaam’s activities. I met Khaled in one of Salaam’s support groups, where I co-facilitated several meetings with him in Church St. 519 centre. In one of my meetings with him I asked him if I can interview him for my research and he gave me his phone number to call and schedule a meeting with him. Khaled preferred to meet me in a coffee shop around the Gay Village and not in his apartment. Khaled speaks Arabic, as his mother tongue, and I suggested to him that he can speak Arabic if he feels more comfortable to do so, but he preferred to speak in English. In fact, all the Arabic speaking people I interviewed in Salaam choose to be interviewed in English though they would mention some words in Arabic, when they referred to an experience they had back in the Middle-East or if the incident had an Arabic context. When talking about queer issues they mainly preferred to use English what seems to dislocate them from their Arabic ‘origin’, which metaphorically suggests that one cannot talk about queer issues in Arabic, and as if
languages of ‘origins’ can not express experiences of queer.

*Sexuality between homes and outside*

Khaled realized that he was gay when he was a student in Europe. His realization was a process that had to take place outside his home, where he could have some freedom to search for himself. His reinterpretation of his Islamic religion could only take place outside the Muslim context he lived in. Khaled’s first gay experience was in Europe with another student in the university and who was insecure about his sexual orientation. Khaled’s journey of his sexual identity was a long path of hesitations, starting with the first relationship:

That was devastating and I started blaming him for me being gay, and it was upsetting and I had a love-hate relationship with him. He was a source of torture and a source of peace. Then for a while I thought that I wasn’t gay, but I guess it was always about a guy who brought it up to me. I felt disturbed and touched, and then there was another issue with another guy, and that’s when it started to be apparent that it was not about a gay man, but it was about me. I still could have sex with women but I would rather be in bed with someone that I was emotionally attracted to. I sometimes question that this might be part of my internalized homophobia. I knew a guy, and I had big issues with being Muslim and being gay, this ruined the relationship and caused it to end. Every time we would have sex I would feel guilt, and sometimes even riding my bike, I was so scared that I would be hit by a car, as a punishment. That was a sign that I wasn’t ready. So, of course it took a while for that feeling to go, I mean it ended the relationship. I couldn’t deal with it.

Khaled’s fear of his homosexuality was linked to religion. Despite the fact that he was questioning the nature of his attraction, his religious understandings troubled him more, even when he accepted that he was gay. The trouble he had with him being Muslim and gay became stronger in Canada, out of his family home, when he started to question and
confront his identity more deeply.

Life of homosexuals in the Middle East, as Khaled remembers, was based a lot on hierarchical relations between the people involved in such relations, and sometimes it is in fact a form of child abuse and prostitution. In such relations, as Khaled told me, a man who penetrates another man is not perceived as gay, but the one who is penetrated is negatively conceived as gay (also see Dunne 1998). He remembers when he was a child returning from several exiles with his family to visit his country of birth, which he has not lived in during his childhood, how young men were trying to harass him sexually:

First of all when I went back to [my country of birth] from [Europe], I was the little cute boy from [Europe] who didn’t know a word of Arabic. So many guys came over to pick me up. They were mature, you can even call them men, and that was a form of abuse and they had no problem with it. […] It was a bit scary. This was probably one of the reasons why I didn’t want to go back because I feel kind of being traumatized by that. [Same-sex scene] exists but underground, under the cover. There were the gay guys who dance at wedding and parties and people loved them, but I have always see that they were at the bottom of the social ladder. They are poor, and at the end of the day they are fags who dance and make women laugh. It was nice to have them around but they did not have a status. […] I even had this woman who told me “I don’t understand how someone is educated and well-raised and turns out to be gay”. […] It is not a shame if a guy goes and tops other guy because he is just learning and this is his way of experimenting, then you get married and have kids. But if you are the bottom one, you are wasted. […] This is part of the internalized homophobia that I don’t want to associate myself with. They were from this social class that I didn’t belong to, that is how segregated and separated from society they are, just like prostitutes.

Since homosexuality is associated with prostitution and lower class, Khaled did not want to be considered within such conceptualization, and his frustrations emerged from these association and difficulties in being denied identity among his own community, which reinforces him to be distant from his family home.
Going back home, going back to the closet.

Khaled’s migration to Canada was a way for him to live ‘out of the closet’ and live his life as queer somewhere else outside of his conservative cultural ‘origins’. His arrival in Canada, a new place he had never been to, paradoxically felt like ‘returning’ home, while returning to the closet when he is visiting his family felt like ‘exile’:

I arrived to Canada three years ago and that’s when I decided actually to ‘come out’. I cannot say “I decided”...the choice that I had was probably finding myself in Canada. I was closeted when I came here. I felt like I came to a place where I’ve always been before. I told myself what’s the point of being in the closet, and I found myself being with people and acting like a straight man, and being introduced as a straight man. [...] Unfortunately, people I were with at the beginning they were all straight and probably expected me to be straight. I am not sure if they would accept me now as gay, they might. [...] I cannot say that I am entirely out. I think it was a process and everyday I realized that I took a step forward. I am lucky to say that I haven’t taken any step back. The only time that I had to take a step back was when I went to visit my family; I went back to ‘the closet’. [Emphasis added]

Coming out of the closet is conditioned to being out of the family or childhood home spaces. After being out of the closet in Toronto and after living and experiencing a queer life, the visit to his home became a return to the ‘closet’ and the lies that Khaled does not want to go through again. He associates home, where his family is, with the closet. Being in the closet is an act of symbolic violence through which he is denied identity and forced to live in disguise. Khaled visited his family two years ago. He remembers this trip as an unpleasant and uncomfortable time where he was forced into “untrue” ‘performances’ and into social imprisonment:
I went back two years ago and it was just automatic: *I arrived and I was straight*. This all happened after I got used to myself as ‘out’. It wasn’t as easy as it used to be, and then exactly I realized how much lies I was in. It was a sad thing to do, when I have to be performing on a daily basis. People used to ask me if I could go back and live in the Gulf, and I used to answer ‘probably’. But now I associate *that with going back into ‘the closet’*, oh God, I cannot comprehend that idea! You know regardless of the physical thing of being a homosexual man, the psychological worlds are very heavy and I have to admit that it had an impact on me before, and now I see how it will affect me, to be jailed again, that would be very devastating. [Emphasis added]

Khaled performs differently when he visits his family; he lives in a ‘closet’ where he has to invent stories about his personal life and his thoughts about the future. In addition, as it is central for most family centered societies, stories of enforcement into marriage play another obstacle in the process of coming out or living one’s sexual life freely:

When I go back home, I have friends who know that I am gay and they know me and they are fine with it, but mostly with my family. Of course at this age, when you hit 30, that is the time for marriage for a man, and I would be asked everyday, not probably by my close parents, but family friends and my brother and his wife. They are on a mission to get me married, then you have to manipulate the situation because you don’t want to be completely opposed to it, because that will raise questions, and you don’t want to give into it, because that isn’t going to happen. So you have to balance it, and this is really difficult, you try, you just say: “Financially, I am not ready”. It worked for a while but this stage has to pass, to a different stage where you have to come up with a different excuse. The common question was: “Who is your girlfriend”? People always expected that I should be with someone. [...] That was when I realized that I have to lie to protect myself.

In Canada Khaled is out to the queer community but not to his ethnic community, fearing that the news about him being gay will pass to his family in the Gulf. He knows that he can not entirely confess his emotions to them and he always has to hide a large part of his life from them:
I don’t have family in Canada, that is why I am pretty much out here, and it is good and bad, because I miss my family. One thing I must admit is that despite the great relationship I have with my family it would have been better if I was ‘out’ to my family. I am not sure if they will accept me, but it would be comfortable, but there is always this problem, that they will not accept me. [...] When you hide one aspect of your life you end up hiding everything, and everything you do becomes a secret and that always has been a problem. If I had a choice I would be in touch with my family, if I had a choice to be straight and stay in touch with my family, I would be straight and I would have my own family with children. But it is not a matter of choice.

As a believer in God and Islam, Khaled was struggling with the hegemonic discourses on homosexuality in Islam, which were conveyed in the mosques he used to visit. He argues that he was not allowed to question the nature of such disciplining discourses, and only when he moved to Canada he was allowed to ask questions and draw a different interpretation of Islam and homosexuality.

I believe in God and I believe in everything that I was taught, and I am thankful that I came to Canada because it taught me how to think. When you are Muslim back home you don’t question [...]. I was taught that being gay was a sin, and I couldn’t question that. How could I be born with a sin that I couldn’t choose? I started thinking that it was a punishment and I kept thinking why should I be punished with this, I couldn’t have found what I have done, and maybe I was very young. So, why would I be punished for something I did when I was a child. The Qur’an says that you don’t get punished for things you did before hitting puberty. Our religion is based on punishments and fears. Seriously, I used to go to a lot of Friday prayers, and I didn’t want to go anymore because the only think I would hear is ‘punishment’, ‘hell’, ‘suffering’ and all that. I had my own fears so I said to myself I cannot go there anymore. I have never lost my faith, I still believe in God, but now I realized that there are people who portray religion in such a way, that they manipulate it to control people. I remember how teachers in school would lie to us and create a fear of God, not love. Even when Allah [The word for God in Arabic] uses the word fear it is in sense of respect and obey. We seek religion to feel secure and safe.

‘Out’ out of family home
Khaled's story of coming out to himself was related to his positioning against his family 'home'. His visit back home took him back to the closet, so that home becomes associated with the closet, which in this case also transforms it into not-home and into social and psychological exile. In Canada, however, Khaled felt 'home' with himself and his identity. He could ask questions that he was not allowed to ask in his home, especially those related to his religion and his sexual identity:

When I came to Canada, I was allowed to question, and I met people who raise these questions. For the first time I felt that I was allowed to question and maybe there was something good out there for me, despite being gay. I felt I started to accept myself more, and there was a level of comfort. I pray, although not everyday, but I always fast, and I remember that it is part of my religion and it is for God. In Islam, we say that everything you do is for yourself except for fasting; it is for God.

In Canada, Khaled was caught with the fear of being ousted by any one who is from his community. Therefore, he always tried to hide the fact that he was gay from his community or even the Middle-Eastern people he knew. Although far from his family home, Khaled fears that his family might get 'the news' about him being gay. He is, therefore, partly out of the closet:

It was a constant effort not to be known to anyone as a Muslim man from [my country of birth], being invisible is the best thing. No one knows me; I can actually be amalgamated in the city. People who see me do not know where I am from, they think I am from the Caribbean, they might guess but they don't know where I am exactly from, even [people from my community] sometimes don't know me, from the way I look or I dress. I could hide easily, that is a great thing, but at the end of the day who wants to hide forever. I am hiding from certain people, not from everybody. [...] There are lots of people from my country, and I have been told by someone: "do not let anyone know that you are here". Because they will let everyone knows back home that there is this person from this family, who is out in Canada fooling around, and bending over to every single guy. It is not even close to the truth but this is what they will say.
Although he lives away from his family home, the fear that his family will know about his sexuality is always there, which makes the possibility of creating a queer home outside his family limited, since he can not be entirely out to his family back home or even his community here. Being “out” here implies many risks to his family’s honour and reputation back home; this is why Khaled has to live a ‘double’ life hiding most of his life from his community, in fear of being exposed to rumours that might travel to his family (home):

There is a risk, as soon as you are known how you can be safe; how can you be so sure about anything? I mean you are far from home but not very far from home. So that is something that I resent and I feel that it is a struggle. So you have to separate yourself from your real original life and to live the life you want and it is a big shame. I know people here [in Canada], their families have accepted them and they live their lives here, and it is a great thing and don’t take this for granted. This thing I am not sure I will ever achieve in my life with my family. My relationship with my family has suffered a lot already in the past because of me hiding and it continues to. There is nothing I could do about it. [Emphasis added]

While he feels insecure and threatened in his family home for being queer, Khaled praises Canada for being a comfortable place where he feels mostly that he belongs to. In his case, queer identity plays a pivotal role in locating and positioning his home. Khaled’s home is where his family is but since he is denied acknowledgment of his sexual identity, home becomes a space of exile, he cannot return ‘fully’ to, as queer:

When I say home, I refer to where my family is. But I have never felt home in [my country of birth]; I never lived there. I never felt home in Europe because I lived there a long time ago and it was transitional, and I actually am looking to make myself a home. I have longed to have a place called home. Canada is an astounding place to call home, but again, here in Canada I am in a transition, and if that happens and all goes well I will start calling it home. I have never been in a place where I can really call home, even after 27 years living in the Gulf, I never
felt at home. Because at the end of the day you are a foreigner, you still have Visa and you have no rights, you can not do what you want...The sexuality issue just adds to it, and that is why I feel more comfortable here, and I call it home, I enjoy the lifestyle and the multiculturalism in Canada, and the people...it is amazing, and of course I can be who I am and it is a great thing.

Khaled’s journey to Canada can be described as a process of ‘constructing home’. While home is where his family is, in terms of family and cultural connection, home also can be found in Canada, a reality of exile. His positioning as queer shapes to a large extend Khaled’s notion of belonging and conceptualization of home. For him, home is associated with his relation with ‘the closet’; he mostly feels home when he is freely and fearlessly ‘out of the closet’.

Aminah

*Generations in exile*

Aminah, who is an educator and a writer, is very involved with Salaam and is an active figure in the Muslim queer community and in South-Asian feminist and queer based communities. I met Aminah in my first encounter with Salaam when Rauda Morcos from Aswat, a Palestinian queer women group, came for a fundraiser tour. In my first meeting with Aminah, I was impressed by her creativity, political activities and social justice visions. She, as many other Muslim queers in Salaam, was born in an unstable political reality and lived through constant displacement, when her family had to leave India several generations ago:

I was born in Zanzibar and I was born during the revolution which meant that my family had to leave. My grandparents had to move to Pakistan...It was at the time when the British gone out [of Zanzibar]...and the Omani Arabs, who have been
colonizing, were still in power. Various people thought that it would be another Arab oligarchy. The Indian were caught in between. When the revolution happened it was very bloody and Indians and Arabs where targeted, and many Arabs left. I know my family left out of absolute fear. The loss in Zanzibar was a huge part of my life; even now as an adult it is the place I always return to. [...] At the age of 7 I had to leave for Pakistan, and my mother wanted me to get good education, so I went to study in a school in Pakistan. I was there during a crucial period of 1971-1979. Pakistan had a war with India at that time. It was very interesting at that time, and then Bhutto was executed and we had an Islamic military regime. Then I was sent back to my parents in Tanzania. My grandparents were tired of having me; I was a young girl and I was problematic. I did not want to wear a hijab in a household where all women wore hijab, and I was acting out, not very much, but certainly speaking my mind. I was supposed to be sent back in ’79, and my parents promised that I would be sent to Kenya to finish my A-level, because I didn’t finish my A-level in Pakistan. But the borders with Kenya were shut down. So I stayed at home for two years. [Emphasis added]

As reflected in her story, Aminah’s childhood consisted of constant displacement due to political circumstances. She also remarks how at a young age she already had a different opinion on cultural and religious issues like refusing to wear the hijab. After her transfer to Tanzania she had to stay home not being able to move anywhere till she was sent to Canada to her relatives:

In my community, of Indians in Tanzania, if you went to university you had to do military service, so a lot of families did not send their daughters to study and a lot of women didn’t have education. [...] When I was in Tanzania at the age of 18, (early 1980s) no girl my age got school. Those years were suicidal and unhappy, I was afraid of my life and future and I didn’t want to get married. I didn’t know that I was attracted to women, but I just knew that I hated the heterosexual system and I announced at the age of 8 that I am never going to get married. Then I came to Canada when I was 18 and I had relatives here who wanted my father to immigrate as well. [My parents] were doing very bad in Tanzania. Things were very bad economically, especially for South Asians. Then I came as an international student, and I stayed with my aunt and I was supposed to take care

27 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1928-1979) was the 4th Pakistani President 1971 to 1973 and the Prime Minister from 1973-1977.
28 A-level is equivocal to high-school.
of her kids, and I thought that I will go back to Tanzania. A year later that didn’t happen so I was stuck here, that was when my parents decided to immigrate in a rush. So it was a very strange and difficult entrance to Canada.

Displacement and fantasies of ‘return’ are a large part of Aminah’s life. Her family originates in India and several generations ago migrated to Zanzibar as a result of religious prejudice against Shi’a Muslims. At the age of seven, Aminah was sent “back” to Pakistan, where her grandparents lived, leaving a political revolution in Tanzania to encounter instability in Pakistan, when Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was executed in 1979 and an Islamic military regime took over.

Women in the family

Aminah was born to a religious Muslim family where all women in the house were veiled, except for her as she resisted wearing it from a very young age. In the following narrative Aminah describes her position in her family and the dynamics that set the social relations, all of which existed in a diasporic setting:

I am a Muslim; I mean I was raised an extremely religious Shi’a family. My family left India because of religious persecution. Part became Ismaili29, but my family chose to become more traditional-orthodox. So even the reason why we first came was a political reason, and that affected my family. I come from a very well respected family. My family was known for their women who never showed their faces. […] Even so for me, growing up in this very religious family and being raised by my grandfather, who was a man in exile, sitting home, cleaning peas and shrimps. He was an old man, who used to be a merchant back in Zanzibar, and my grandmother in the kitchen, and all these girls were sent for education, and yet it was a house where we talked. Everything was talked about in the metaphor of religion. We prayed together, Ramandan was big, and Muharram for Shi’a was big. […] As a kid I rebelled, I didn’t want to get married or wear a hijab. My mother had to wear hijab when she was young, and she didn’t go to

29 Ismaili are a branch of Islam and a major division that belongs to Shi’a community.
school, and yet my aunt got education. [...] I think the whole thing of losing a country...so my grandfather, oddly enough, wanted me to be educated because he couldn’t trust anything anymore. So, for the first time, education was a real possibility and my aunts got a chance to study yet they would be married off. Because my aunt got married and went to the “West”, and took off the veil, my grandfather was upset, since his daughter got married and he got no control over her. She took off the veil to find a job. [...] Then what my grandfather said is that there is no point of putting the veil then taking it out. For me, my younger aunt and my other cousin, he gave us the choice. He said: “all of them I told them to put the hijab and they took it off, this is not a game, I will now give them the choice: ‘if you put it you don’t remove it’”. I didn’t want to put it. My other aunt and I were the only ones who didn’t wear it. I, also, at the age of 12 lost my faith completely, so I declared myself an atheist which is not a good thing to do in a religious family. It led to huge fights. We used to pray five times a day and I would stay in my room pretending to pray. I remember that lose of faith as being overwhelming, and it made me feel very lonely. Although I gave up Islam and gave up a whole culture, I was critical of the West, and it wasn’t that I wanted to become Westernized, but I wanted to be something else, and I still wanted to be someone else.

The hijab in this narrative is a signifier of Aminah’s religious diasporic community. It asserts the sense of belonging and the clinging to ethnic-national roots, and in this case it is found in religion. Aminah, however, refused to wear the hijab and even declared herself as an atheist and lost her sense of belonging to her community. Giving up Islam, as she claims, felt as if she was giving up her whole society and culture. Refusing to be Westernized, as a response, she sought a (third) space where she could be someone else.

Since she was born to a diasporic family that has no connection to a ‘nation’, Aminah is always constructing and reconstructing her spaces of belonging that are torn between Pakistan and Tanzania. Being a woman also adds to her feelings of exclusion and displacement. She talked a lot in her interview about the difficulties that many women face in her community in Zanzibar and Pakistan. To her mind, women’s sexuality in its diverse forms, homosexual or heterosexual, is controlled and disciplined in her
religious community. Thus, on the one hand, the issue of her being a lesbian is an issue of
her being a woman who is sexually active and aware of her sexuality, and on the other
hand, it is an issue of having a socially deviant and sinful sexuality. These concerns
pushed her to think about leaving:

I was terrified of my own community and with the whole debates of Sharia that
were going on. I remember back in the 80s that my fears were of being killed, not
because I was a lesbian, but because I was a woman who ran from home and who
was sexually active. I don’t know how real the possibility was, because my father
stopped talking to me, and it caused huge troubles with my family. [...] When I
took my suitcases and left home it was a huge event, although now women are
going to university. I think the idea of a woman leaving home is still huge for
South-Asian women and for Muslim women, and especially when the choices are
very obvious when you are rejecting marriage. I was afraid, of coming out.

As Aminah indicates, women in her community were supposed to stay home until they
got married, but she decided to leave her home and look for somewhere else. Aminah
was introduced to lesbianism in Pakistan through her friend. As in many cases in
conservative societies the idea of lesbianism is conceived as a deviant behavior and not as
a reclaimed political or social identity. For many women in conservative societies the
main concern is resisting arranged marriages or gender discrimination, which in turn
becomes a political struggle. Her friend’s story in Pakistan signifies the tension produced
when women’s sexuality is controlled and disciplined:

My best friend, after having several lesbian relationships, (not with me
unfortunately because I think she was adorable, we adored each other, but we
never had it on, we were friends) had fallen in love with a woman, and that is
when I came to know about her lesbianism. I didn’t hear it from Canada even
though I knew it existed in Canada. I wasn’t into women at that time, I was into

30 Sharia is the body of Islamic law. It is the legal framework within which public and some private aspects
of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Muslim principles jurisprudence.
boys, or actually I was into my freedom, for my own liberation and for myself. But my friend had a relationship with a woman, and she had an arranged marriage. [...] then, my friend was stuck in this horrible marriage, she was frustrated and she ended up having affairs with married men...She was really miserable and unhappy. Later, she got divorced. I thought I loved Pakistan but I knew that I did not belong there.

In one of her visits to Tanzania, Aminah discovered a new side of the subtle lesbian and sexual life of women in her community, which is caught between conformity and social change, where they do not have a lot of space for agency. Thus, they end up in an underground scene where power relations between different classes and statuses are enacted:

I had a childhood friend in Dar es Salaam whom I used to think she had a crush on me when we were 16. When I met her, she used to hang out with this woman, and she lived with her mother and they weren’t married and I assumed that they were partners. But when I had this conversation with her [about lesbian relationships], she did not realize what I was talking about, and I realized that my friend was actually afraid of expressing herself sexually. I mean I came from a place where if you were a single woman, you had no space to express your sexuality and if you expressed it, you got punished. It has changed. I have this younger friend who is 22 years old she is expressing her sexuality and hiding it from her family but exploring it. She is heterosexual, but the risk she takes as a woman is huge, and I celebrate her courage tremendously but I also fear for her. But this other friend of mine who is my age, she was kind of clueless and maybe she chose to be clueless. She was kind of seducing all the women in the mosque. So, there was this underground culture of married women sleeping with other married women that I didn’t discover before. It first amazed me, but then it made me feel ill, because I thought it was so deceptive. I found out it was so manipulated and I was shocked and I think that’s what happens when you live in patriarchal structures. [...] But here I am, coming to Canada, and I also came to a space where I earned my living as a woman, and the minute I had my own income I bought my freedom from my family. A lot of women don’t have that space. It is hard to find work where I come from. It is also hard to live on your own.

The lesbian scene described in this quotation manifests that the same-sex scene between
women, in Tanzania, exists subtly and it functions within a heteronormative social system. Most of these women, as Aminah told me, were married and some to rich men, which made her think about the nature of these lesbian relationships, where it is based on manipulation and abuse. Those women lived in an oppressive patriarchal system, where they cannot cherish their sexuality or live independently from their families.

The story of Aminah’s friend is a common one of many queer women who end up caught in the vicious circle of social control. Some succeed in getting out of it and live their lives in their home country negotiating their personal life with their social life, and others, like Aminah, and many other women in Salaam choose or are forced to choose to leave their family homes. What this story portrays, (like others that I was told) is that there is same-sexual life in conservative societies that is dealt with by finding strategies of survival and/or resisting social restrictions.

Aminah defines herself as a lesbian. After she migrated to Toronto and lived in the city for a while, she decided to pay a visit to her family in Zanzibar. During that visit, Aminah was outed by her aunt. She pointed out the tension that was created by this outing and the new reality and relation with her home and family who conceptualized her sexual life in terms of family shame and dishonour:

It was very intense and terrible, because I just went to Zanzibar and I was ‘outed’ by my aunt, and thrown out of her house. Then I had to come ‘out’ in front of my mother as I was visiting. She said to me: ‘how can I show my face now in Tanzania? You have shamed me and my family!’ She said all sorts of things that were really frightening. My girlfriend didn’t understand that at that point, because she is not Muslim...there were a lot of anti-Muslim sentiments. I think it was hard for her to understand how much I loved my family, even though they did these things that hurt me... It was a terrible visit.
Aminah’s family honour is linked to her sexuality and sexual behaviour, and outing such sexuality is conceived as violating her family’s honour. Her visit to Zanzibar did not encourage Aminah to return back to her homeland, although she told me she loved Zanzibar and she always misses her family. A couple of months after the interview, Aminah went to visit her family again with her partner. Her visit was a chance for Aminah to introduce her partner, for the first time, to her family and tour the country. Although she did not introduce her partner as such, Aminah told me that it was understood that she was her partner, and her family was very hospitable and welcoming to them. Her trip brought back the strong attachment that Aminah wanted to have with her family. Her partner, who is a Christian South-Asian, was introduced to different culture and values and as Aminah told me her partner understood her more and also got attached to Aminah’s family.

*Traveling (for) home*

From living in a diasporic reality where homelands are India and Pakistan, Aminah was forced to leave her country of birth Tanzania, to Pakistan then back again to Tanzania. From Tanzania Aminah decided to leave for Canada to escape the patriarchal reality she lived in. When she left for Canada, Aminah began reflecting on her previous experiences living in Pakistan and Tanzania and how those diasporic and exilic experiences shaped her identifications in Canada:

When I came to Canada I felt more Pakistani than Tanzanian because those two years I have been to Tanzania were horrible. I hated that so much. I was in this terrible ghettoized Indian life. So, for me Pakistan had been my life, even though
I had a difficult childhood there. I think I wanted a nation [...] and I came from a diasporic community that does not have a nation. When I went back [to Pakistan] in 1984, I realized that it was different. It was lovely to meet my school friends, but it was hard.

Ironically, after getting Canadian citizenship, Aminah wanted to leave Canada to live in other different contexts, different than the inhospitable culture she faced in Canada:

Well, my first thing I wanted to do when I get the Canadian citizenship is to have a passport so I could travel, because having a Tanzanian passport at one point was very difficult. So I left as soon as I got the Canadian passport. I left because I hated Canada so much, and this was in ’87. [...] Then, I was in Spain for a year, and it was amazing to live in a completely different country having this freedom as a woman. Also for me, Canada was racist. In the 80s I faced a lot of racism and I was treated badly by my professors. I found Toronto to be very unwelcoming.

Escaping an arranged marriage in Tanzania, then facing racism and feeling alienated in Canada, Aminah decided to leave for some other place for a while. Aminah found the second and third South-Asians generation in Canada self-orientalizing and romanticizing their cultures in countries of origin:

I also have experienced some kind of racism from the South-Asian community when they found me, you know “fresh of the boat”, and it [Islam] wasn’t something that I reclaimed; it was something that I rejected. A lot of people rejected [Islam] when they were 8 years old and reclaimed it when they were in their 20s. But I came here as proud Third-Worlder person so I found [my identity] difficult to negotiate.

Searching for herself and her spaces of belonging, while living in a displaced socially marginalized community that always wanted to belong to a nation, as Aminah said, she found the revolution in Iran to be a ‘spiritual home’ and ‘belonging’:

When the revolution in Iran happened, many people wanted to join it. My family
wanted to join the revolution, and we are Shi’ite, and it was the most transformative thing to my community which is a minority in India. It meant that the revolution gave me a sense of a spiritual home and a sense of belonging, and my community went from being not very religious community to heavily khomeinist. [Emphasis added]

Sexual liberation in travel

Aminah’s trip to Spain and Turkey was a journey of sexual ‘liberation’. In Spain, she experienced her first lesbian relationship and other types of sexuality:

Spain was great. I had my first lesbian relationship there. I also met these queer people who were very leftist [...] and to me it was all part of my liberation. I had sex with a man, which was good, but the relationship with the woman was hard. She was White and Jewish and she was very difficult, and it went for ten years, off and on. I left for Turkey for a year, and had lots of other relationships there, but never had a boyfriend. I wanted to have various sexual partners, but the woman I was with didn’t want to identity herself as a lesbian, and I didn’t know who the hell I was.

After this long self searching journey to Spain and Turkey, Aminah settled in her sexual identification. She identifies herself as a lesbian, and her long-term relationship with her current partner became a space where she can form a sense of home:

I am a woman-identified. I really think I had bad sex with my first girlfriend and I think that confused me, because I was in love with her but I had terrible sex. I think it took me a longer time to understand my sexuality, and I think it took me a time to understand how it worked. I am very comfortable with being identified as a lesbian, in terms of my sexual object choice and I very much live as a lesbian. I am not really interested in being with men anymore, and I think it is partly because I am in a monogamous relationship with my partner. [...] Never in my life I had a monogamous relationship. I was 35 years old and I never had a commitment to one person. So, commitment was a great fear that I had. I had to learn more about it and it was a spiritual journey for me. You know creating a place where I can call home, since I think I had no real family, because I had a

31 A different pronunciation for the word “Shi’a”.
32 Supportive of Ayatollah Khomeini who was one of the prominent figures during the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979.
fragmented sense of family. *I never had a space of my own or a home of my own.* So for me, I think when I fell in love I wanted home. Of course, it did not work that way, because she had a very different idea of what home meant to her, and we had to know how to negotiate that, and I think I have learned a lot about how problematic our desires were. [Emphasis added]

Home in this sense is found in spaces of committed partnership similar to traditional notions of home that is materially linked to family spaces. Since she did not have a space she called home, where she felt comfortably in love with her lesbian partner, her relationship with her partner became conceptualized as ‘home’.

Aminah’s conceptions of home are not confined only to family or partnership. Since she is queer and a “Third-Worlder”, her conception of home is unfixed:

I think one of the things that connects [me and my partner], is that we identify as Third Worlders, *we can not be only queer.* Sometimes it is not part of our identity. Sometimes we don’t even think about it. *Home is always multiple,* and when we have our conversations it is *always because we are projected elsewhere.* It took me a lot of time to find someone who understands that about me, and I didn’t find it very much with many of the immigrants. [Emphasis added]

Her positioning as a “Third-Worlder” living in a White-Western culture complicates her identification. As she argues, being a lesbian is not the only constitutive element of being or identifications. In fact sometimes this positioning is marginalized and being a woman of colour or being a Muslim post 9/11 becomes more central to her experiences and her configuration of home. This is a relocated multiple notion of home, where several situations and positions can be fragmented and redistributed among different spaces of home. Home is not only Canada, nor is it only Tanzania but it is both, because she can find it with her relation within her partner in a queer space, and she can find it in her memories of her life in Tanzania. For queer Muslims, like Aminah, homes are not found
but are constructed and worked on through reconfiguring spaces of belonging and reworking ideas of belonging. It has involved a lot of compromises such as hiding her private life for a long while from her family and not being able to live as a free woman among her own community in Tanzania. Thus, Aminah’s story exemplifies the slippery characteristics of home, where it is, on the one hand, materially fragile and unstable in a context of diaspora and, on the other hand, since it lives in the context of displacement, home as an idea, becomes a central experience in the lives of diasporic and sexually, ethnically or culturally marginalized subjects.

*Narratives of Muslim Queer displacements: Growing up in the Diaspora*

**Faridah**

Faridah was born in Zambia to a diasporic Indian Muslim family. At the age of four, her family immigrated to Canada and she lived her childhood in a small town near Toronto. Faridah is one of the coordinators in Salaam and she is a very active member in the community. I met her at the first Salaam party I attended while volunteering to sell tickets at the entrance. Faridah and I had a conversation and we decided to stay in touch and meet more to discuss having more women and transpeople involved in Salaam. She told me that it was important for me to come and co-facilitate the general meetings or the support groups, since occasionally women come to these circles to find that there are no other women from Salaam to address issues related to lesbians or to their experiences. A
year later Faridah and I, along with other women in the group, decided to meet up and have a Salaam women and trans group.

Queer in identity

Faridah identifies herself as a lesbian and, similar to other Salaam members who lived all their lives in Canada with their families, Faridah is out of the closet to her family, though her outing experience with her parents is exceptional when compared to most Muslim queers in Salaam. Salaam members who were more exposed to the queer scene in Toronto or the Western discourse of queer politics, used the word queer to identity themselves as it is more inclusive and has explicit political implications. In the following quote Faridah tells her story of coming out and her positioning within the queer identification that she claims to be politicized:

Sometime I identify as lesbian and sometimes as queer. I like the political implications of “queer”, being inclusive, but also I believe that sexuality is something fluid. I am very “out”. I am “out” to at least all my family in North America, and some people in India, like my maternal grandmother and a grand aunt and couple of cousins. [...] [Coming ‘out of the closet’] was a process and it took lots of time. I started with an aunt who was an open minded then I told my sister and dad. I also had a commitment ceremony with my previous partner, and I invited people to come, and those who didn’t know knew. Also with my grandmother we had a conversation about it, and somebody had told her. I felt it was better that she knew rather than not, and I didn’t like to hide things and there weren’t really negative consequences. I didn’t think that I will be harmed, but I was worried to be alienated to people. [...] In a family that is somehow open and supportive, we didn’t have hardly any emotional or sexual abuse. So I thought that my father would give me a silent treatment, and he didn’t do anything terrible and it took them a long time to understand [my sexuality]. But because my family is good, I didn’t expect something bad to happen, [...] some said they would accept it, some just tolerate it.
Faridah’s story of coming out of the closet to her family, as indicated above, was an easy process, as oppose to Aminah’s story of imposed ‘outing’, or to Omar and Khaled whose coming out of the closet seems an impossible task, wherein they fear losing their families and losing contact with their family homes. In Faridah’s case, her outing does not involve a loss of homeland but of family home, since her family lives in Canada.

"It is this belonging and not belonging"

Faridah did not experience living in another place except for Canada (she left Zambia when she was a child) and as a self-identified woman of colour her experiences are all interpreted and practiced in terms of her positioning as a queer woman of colour. Being a woman of colour is her most constitutive experience, and being a Muslim, yet not a religious one, as she always emphasized, recently became part of her identity and experience. Being a diasporic woman of colour, Faridah’s belonging is constantly altering between different spaces and time:

I have not lived somewhere else [outside Canada]. I spent all my life here. Yet, I also recognize that when you are a person of color there is no sense of belonging. I also really feel that there are many “Canadas”, but for a long time, people of colour will be on the margins. I mean I had a good life and a good job, but I also know that racism is there all the time. It is this belonging and not belonging.

Growing up in a White town, as a child and a teenager, Faridah internalized the ‘fact’ that she was inferior to her White neighbours so she felt detached from her Muslim and South Asian origins. Later in her teens she became more politicized as she reclaimed her South-
Asian identity to herself. Her main concern in the interview was her complex identities and the gradual processes of the crystallization of each identity:

It was a small White town, very few people of colour. I didn’t have the time and I couldn’t figure what was wrong with it. I grew up with so much internalized racism: what was good was White. I didn’t know who I was in South Asian cultures and what was my place. For a long time, I did not have people of colour friends. I defiantly cut my roots and I was seeking integration. When I was 19 I had a very politicized South Asian friend and I learned a lot from her. So, she got me to think about race and racism.

Faridah’s connection to her Muslim identity happened later after her political identification with the other components of her identities. Only after the racism she faced after the 9/11 attacks on the United States, did she ‘came out’ as politically Muslim:

My identity was first linked to feminism, then to racial identity, then to sexual one, and then I came to the Muslim one. I used to say: “I am a South Asian lesbian” but I wouldn’t mention the Muslim part, in the sense that I don’t believe in things a lot of Muslims believe in. My own family wasn’t religious, so I just assumed that I couldn’t be a Muslim who doesn’t behave in a certain way, so I had to be outside of Islam. I had to change my point of view after 9/11, a very common story. […] I always knew that racism exist here, but it is always subtle, but suddenly I would experience clear racism. Like someone in a car, while I am riding my bicycle, would say: “go back to where you came from”. This never happened to me. […] Then on the streetcar, someone yelled at me for not moving my backpack, and this never happened to me. The other day I was in a store and then my change got smashed on the tables. Then I joined Salaam, and I still didn’t know where my place was, and I begun to feel that it could be a lot more diverse than I could imagine. I knew about it before but I never was interested. Then I remember meeting [Naser] in an event, and he asked me: ‘Are you a Muslim?’, and I answered: ‘well, I am not really’… I thought I cannot be Muslim.

Faridah thought that she could not reclaim her ‘Islam’ if she was a lesbian since Islam and religions, in general, are perceived as anti-queer. In her case, it was the racism after 9/11 that made her re-think her ‘return’ to her Muslim origins, where such a return is
politicized and where her relation to Islam is mainly social-political rather than spiritual.

Her connection to Islam brought her into activism with Salaam and the queer Muslim community in general. Yet, such connections are lacking when it comes to the larger Toronto queer community that is alienating to Muslim or other ethnic queer communities:

They don’t find meaningful ways to integrate people of colour here. It is on different levels, so either people feel exoticized or excluded. Sometimes you think that there should be some political activities that should be done; there are lots of stereotypes, racism and homophobia.

The queer scene in Toronto is alienating, as Faridah perceives it, in being dominated by White masculine gay men culture, which excludes women and non-White communities:

It is hard to relate to Church St. I don’t come a lot. Today we are in Church St. It can be a fun place, but it isn’t where I live. I would never live here, it is expensive, it is mainstream and very White and male dominated. [...] I come [to Church St.] as a tourist, and I don’t feel that I would live near a bar and all the expensive restaurants. [...] The scene doesn’t speak to me.

Faridah’s connection to her ethnic-cultural positioning is as central as her gender or queer one. As a South-Asian lesbian she does not relate to the queer scene only because it speaks to her in terms of her queerness. For her and others in Salaam, being queer is not their main component of their selves. Being queer, to her, does not indicate identification to what we witness in the ‘Gay Village’. This is why she chooses to live in another neighborhood which has visible communities of people of colour:

What I like about my neighbourhood is that there are people of colour there. So the grocery stores will have things for people of colour. I think sometimes the dominant way of looking and being gay is so narrow, even for the White people. There is a particular way to behave and socialize. There is nothing wrong about
that because it fits some people. That is the problem with this area. But what the problem with my area is that I cannot walk holding hands with my partner, I wish we had a place which have the two.

Being in a position of an ‘outsider’ in both neighbourhoods, where she is constantly reminded that she is ‘coming’ from somewhere else, either queer or ethnic, questions of home and belonging become central to Faridah’s experience. In Toronto she feels close to home simply because she has not experienced any other place to call home, although she faces difficulties in finding a reflection of herself in the city, in its multiple faces: queer or ethnic:

I feel home because I don’t have somewhere else to feel home in. I lived in other cities, but this is the closest to home, because it is the most diverse city; there are some events going here that I feel connected to them. I didn’t feel that in Ottawa or Mississauga. That is the difference between being queer and White and queer and non-White in this city: White queers don’t have to search hard in this city to find reflections of themselves. I wish I could come to Church St. and feel less of a tourist.

Home and belonging are directly related to one’s positioning. According to Faridah social marginalization implies constant questioning of feelings of belonging. Being a diasporic queer woman, questions of belonging have always troubled Faridah, yet she finds political activism to be a constructive way to get closer to a feeling of home or belonging:

I think I have always been asking this question. I don’t ask it as much anymore, because I found points of belonging. I think being politicized really helped. When you are not politicized you feel you just don’t belong and you feel terrible and lost. But when you are politicized you start looking for solutions where you feel belonging. […] I think having a politicized sense means that it is possible to find ways of belonging. […] I used to ask it more because it was more confusing to me. Now I am more integrated, because of gender, race and sexual orientation. I am now more at home, and now that it is integrated it feels like home. I feel like belonging to myself, and then I can seek out others and be part of a community and help create a community. Because when you are really having all these stuff
that are displaced, you do not know who you are, how can you recognize somebody else? I remember going to McMaster and at that point I was thinking that I was straight and there was a group who was predominantly South Asian Muslims. They were nice people, I was friends with them and they kept trying to invite me to come to their Muslim group. I kept smiling and saying: “thank you for the invitation”. There was no way that I would go, although I didn’t know what they were doing. I personally believed that I have nothing in common with them. I knew I was a South-Asian, but if I had no mirrors around I would have thought that I was White. [Emphasis added]

The 9/11 attacks and the racism that was accelerating against Middle-Eastern and South-Asian people, were, ironically, the mirrors that reminded Faridah where she came from and what was her culture. Her ‘return’ to her cultural ‘roots’ was through activism, where, as she told me, she “came out” as a Muslim to herself. Activism with Salaam and other anti-racist grassroots groups helped her to ‘relocate’ the displaced experiences that her identities are composed of. Thus, home for Faridah is these momentary points of solidarity with those who are similar in experience and identification. ‘Home’ is a politicized entity that is fragmented and cannot be detached from the diasporic, social, gender, and political context she lives in. Although never experienced ‘home’ outside her life in Canada, being marked as someone who comes from somewhere else makes her conception of home and belonging always under examination. For her, home is a place where one finds reflection of one’s self; by creating those circles of Muslim women or trans queer, Faridah recollects her fragmented sense of belonging.

Naser

Naser is a very active member in Salaam. He is part of the coordination group, and he
plays an important part in decision making for the group. He is definitely the most outspoken member; sometimes he is the representative of Salaam to the other communities in Canada and in the world. Naser has been interviewed several times in various magazines and newspapers in Toronto and elsewhere in Canada. He was also an active member of the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC). His family came to Canada from Tanzania, after a year’s stop in England, when he was seven years old. I met Naser in my first encounter with Salaam at the event where the group first met Rauda Morcos from the Palestinian queer women’s group. Naser continuously invited me to their gatherings and meetings, and suggested that I become part of their email list and the coordinating group. At the first Salaam Iftar I attended in 2004 during the holy month of Ramadan, I asked Naser about the possibility of studying Salaam for my thesis, and he agreed to the idea telling me: “as you see, in this Iftar we have so many people from different religions, ethnicities, we have Jews, Christians, queer and non queer”.

"Religious" sexuality

Naser’s process of realization and coming out was linked to his position as a Muslim queer living in a diasporic reality, in which he did not experience the social and cultural norms of a Muslim society:

In the context of now I can say: “Yes I am gay”. I think I first became aware of my attraction towards other men or boys, when I was hitting puberty, when boys start to masturbate and I realized that my sexual fantasy is towards other boys. Being raised in a Muslim home, premarital sex was problematic. I understand that in some Muslim or Muslim oriented societies there are homoerotic relations because of the lack of access [to the other sex]. In some places it is tolerated as natural part of the socialization. But I grew up in a diaspora, so, that kind of socialization wasn’t even a
reality for me. So, when people talked about those cultural norms, they are foreign to me, because I am not Muslim by culture, I am Muslim by heritage and by choice, but I am a Westerner. I guess it was around when I was 14 or 16, that I understood myself to be gay and that was very problematic having grown up in a religious Muslim home, but I don’t think it has to do with the religion. [...] In any case, my home is very liberal and not traditional in many ways, but certainly the issue of homosexuality was very problematic to me. I would go to bed and pray to wake up straight and it never happened. When I was sixteen I told my mom and dad that I was gay, and they told me to pray a lot and it was a natural process and it will go away.

Naser points out in this quote the significance of life in the diaspora, outside of a Muslim society, in the formation of his identity. Naser was raised in a liberal Muslim family, but as he indicated he is a “Westerner” in his style of life. The fact that he was not raised in a Muslim society helped him to find ways out of the discourse of homosexuality as a sin. His parents tried to link his sexuality to lack of praying but it did not take a long time for him to realize that his gayness and queerness was part of his identity and not a deviant or a sinful behaviour. In addition, Naser argues that as a Muslim he did not live in a traditional society or in homoerotic Muslim environment, where there is gender and sexual segregation between boys and girls and men and women. Thus, his coming of age in a Muslim family in Canada made him feel alienated from traditional Muslim cultures or practices, and this is why he insisted in this interview, and in other conversations I had with him, that he is a “Westerner” who is a Muslim by belief and politics.

Naser did not live as an adult in Tanzania, yet he remembers one story from his childhood, which he relates to his relationship with his family and community:

My parents have a friend who is married and he has a daughter. The man was gay, and everyone around knew. He would go out to buy milk and he wouldn’t come back till the next morning. Everybody knew; he was quite feminine, and people would joke about it. No one made a big deal out of it, because he had done what
society expected from him: he got married and had a child. In one of the discussions with my parents about my homosexuality I said: "Is this the kind of life you want, like this man who goes to buy milk and does not come back till the next morning? Even his wife knew".

Marriage is reinforced as a central aspect of social life of "a good Muslim", and, as Naser points out, it is significantly more important to live in a marriage relation, according to his parents' visions, than to live as homosexual, even with the price of having a double life with a woman and holding other gay relations on the side:

I came from a very open minded family where Muslims and non-Muslims, Black and White were coming in and out of my home freely, and it wasn't race or gender a problem. But the gay stuff was an issue, although it was not a hateful kind of thing. When I came "out", it was first with my mom, I was 29, I had already been living with my partner, and they knew that. They knew that we lived in a bachelor apartment for a while. I had actually thought that my parents understood and they didn't want to talk about it with me. Then my mom tried to have an arranged marriage for me, and I come from a community that arranged marriages are going on for two generations. So the couple meets and then they decide. My mom eloped in order to marry my father, so it was even more bizarre. My mom arranged that I meet this woman, whom I could never ever even physically picture me with. So it was extremely difficult coming to terms in being Muslim and gay. As I grow older I am coming to terms with my own understanding of Islam.

Although, as Naser said, his parents were open minded, when it came to homosexuality or sexuality there were limitations to acceptance. However, Naser's mother came to one of the Eid dinners Naser had in his home where he had invited a large number of the queer Muslims in the city. Thus, although there is not full acceptance, Naser's parents attempt to accommodate the idea that their son is gay by being part of his life and not abandoning him. Again, similar to Faridah, Naser was not under threat of losing a 'homeland' in his coming out of the closet; he did not have to escape his country like
Aminah, Khaled or Omar; homeland is not attached to his family-home. But Naser did leave his family-home, on the West cost, to live on the East cost of the Canada with his partner.

Being diasporic, Islam for Naser is an important part of who he is. He has always been religious in terms of beliefs and practices. Being a Muslim by faith and practice and being a queer was a challenge for him, since the two worlds seemed to be paradoxical. Naser lives his life in terms of his religious beliefs that construct a counter discourse to the mainstream homophobic and conservative Islamic interpretations. One of the major issues of politicizing the Muslim queer community is the possibility of being religious and queer. Being religious, Naser always has to justify to others his identification in attaching to two seemingly contradictory components of his self:

It was extremely difficult coming to terms in being Muslim and gay; and as I grew older I came to terms with my own understanding of Islam: I don’t believe that the Qur’an is wrong but I believe that our understanding of the Qur’an is wrong. Out of 114 versus of the Qur’an, a 113 begin with: “Bism el lah al rahman el rahim”, “In the name of God the most gracious and merciful”. What I know is that I didn’t choose to be gay, but I chose to be sexually active and to live my life openly. Because for a period of my life, had I given the chance I wouldn’t have chosen to be gay, and I think most people wouldn’t have chosen to be gay. I was thinking how come this God “al rahman al rahim” [“the most gracious and merciful"] creates me only to condemn me for something that I don’t have a choice, and the answer is that to deny myself? No religion on earth asks you to deny yourself, but to know who you are and to understand yourself in the universe and your relationship to the divine. How this “al rahman al rahim” creates me to condemn me, either to condemn me to hell fire, if I express my sexuality, or to a life of torment if I try to deny it and in that process potentially to hurt other people around me. There is no way to be truthful to that, do I go out to get milk and come home a day after? So I came to the conclusion, that it wasn’t the Qur’an that condemns us, but it is our understanding that condemns us. In terms of homosexuality I came to the understanding that there is something wrong in our understanding of the Qur’an. As I become more actualized and socialized and I
would read the Qur’an, I believe that what the Qur’an talks about is something different than homosexuality.

As the quote indicates Naser’s conception of the Qur’an finds a safe place for homosexuality to exist, and the seemingly homophobic segments in the text are really a matter of interpretation that is controlled by hegemonic Islamic, or anti-Islamic, discourses.

Since he feels that he is a “Westerner”, Naser feels at home in the gay scene in Toronto. He has been living in the “Gay Village” for a long time and he acknowledges the racism that exists among the queer community as well as the support that he got from the community:

I live there, and I work near by. I am fairly “Westernized” and my parents were educated in the West. I am aware of racism and race issues, and when I first came to Toronto, I lived on the edge of the community, and it was very White predominant community. Maybe the most predominant non-White faces were Blacks. There is marginalization and racism within the community, but the support that I got from the community and from XTRA!³³ was phenomenal and it continues to be phenomenal. That doesn’t mean that there is no racism and anti-Muslim comments, of course there is.

As different from Faridah, and others in Salaam, Naser feels a sense of belonging in this country and as he mentioned he is comfortable with being a diasporic ‘Westerner’.

Although he comes from a different culture, being born to an Indian diasporic family in Tanzania, he feels mostly comfortable with his life in the city in Toronto. Questions of

³³“Xtra is published by Pink Triangle Press, a not-for-profit organization born out of and committed to the struggle of lesbians and gay men for sexual liberation and human fulfillment” (www.xtra.ca).
belonging to a home were marginal for Naser, since he feels home in the Canadian or culture and ideas of belonging to a community were more central to him (similar to Faridah). In both cases, Faridah and Naser emphasized the importance of community building and belonging; they were, and still are, heavily involved in bringing Salaam together and connecting it with other queer or Muslim communities. However, Omar, Aminah and Khaled, who lived half of their lives in another country and homeland, emphasized spaces of belonging and notions of homes. They were less concerned with the project of community building than the Salaam members who lived most of their lives in Canada.

**Conclusion**

Stories of queer migrants are stories of ongoing movements and (social) displacements. The narratives I explored in this chapter highlight the fluidity of conceptions of home and belonging. While the literature on queer migration emphasizes the correlation between moving out of family homes or homelands and coming out of the closet, and while it also conceptualizes queer immigration as a form of ‘homecoming’, the narratives in this chapter manifest how migration of queers does not imply a full ‘coming out’ of the closet nor a full arrival home. For queer Muslims who migrated from different countries to Canada, homes are a very slippery concept. Being a queer migrant who escaped a place that denies their existence reinforces that idea of exile as dependant on social relations and social positioning. The positioning of queer is already a
positioning of marginalization, and being materially and culturally displaced reinforces another level of marginalization that is based on ethnicity, culture or nationality. Those in Salaam who immigrated to Canada hold an ambivalent relation to their homelands. Aminah never stopped considering her family-home that she left behind, as a space she loves and calls home, although it is not a space of comfort in terms of sexuality. For Khaled a return home is not possible since he can not imagine himself ‘pushed’ back in the closet, and for him Canada is a place that he would endlessly reconstruct as his home.

For Muslim queers who come to Canada, the issue of being queer becomes less central in their experience of marginalization, and being ethnically and culturally different becomes an issue that needs to be dealt with in the process of configuring notions of homes. Even more so, after coming to Canada and experiencing culturally alienating experiences, some queer Muslims re-imagine their homes as nostalgic spaces to which they rebuild their belongings. Such re-imaginations manifest themselves in Salaam’s activities and events, where Muslim queers bring their tradition and culture to diasporic queer spaces.

The majority of the literature that deals with queer migrations has not dealt in depth with the migration of ethnically, nationally and culturally diverse queers (i.e. Cant 1997 or Marie-Fortier 2001, 2003). This chapter was an attempt to expand the thoughts about other possibilities of belonging by arguing that queer homecoming is never linear and never located in one space, but is multiple and is shifting as it is subjected to replacements and relocations.
I divided this chapter into two types of narrative, the one of Muslim queers who lived most of their live outside Canada, and the other of those who lived most of their lives in Canada. The division is important since the experiences and positionings are different in each case. Queer Muslims who immigrated to Canada hide most of their sexual and social life from their families whom they left in their home-countries. Those who lived most of their life in Canada lead an out life with their families. Those who migrated recently have more connections with their countries of origin and feel more alienation in the city than those who have always lived here. Members of Salaam who were raised in Canada adopt the Western discourse of identity politics and mostly define themselves as queer, since queer is an already politically charged term. They also see their struggle in Canada not of resettlement in a new reality, but of negotiating their lives with their families in Canada and with the wider queer community. Also, their relations with their families in Canada were stronger than those who left their families back home. All Salaam members who were raised in Canada mentioned in their interviews the fact that they faced a lot of racism as Muslims or as queer.
CHAPTER FOUR

Salaam’s Queering Islam and Islamizing Queer: Dialectics and Transformation of Queer and Religious Spaces

Spaces of Islam and queer are seemingly separate spaces. Yet, for members of Salaam, such spaces are inevitably intertwined, and they are also reproduced and constructed through Salaam’s activities, interpretation and representations of Islam and of queer identities. Salaam brings these spaces together and demonstrates the impossibility of being in one space without being in the other. In this lays the core of Salaam’s formation. I want to draw attention to the dialectical relation between Muslim spaces and queer spaces. In this sense, one space is defined, contested and shaped through the other. The ongoing production of this dialectic is located on a borderzone space in-between the diasporic Muslim community in Canada and the queer community in Toronto. This borderline positioning enables Salaam to be distinguishable among both Muslims and queers in being the only group that attempts to make such a linkage between both communities.

This chapter focuses on Salaam’s attempts to create spaces of home. Although those spaces are unfixed, I attempt to demonstrate that in drawing spaces of homes, Salaam excludes other positionings, as in the case of most identity-based communities, making the task of reterritorializing homes that were left behind to homes in current diasporic spaces an ongoing process that is never fully achieved. This is in no way to suggest a criticism of Salaam, but it is a critical observation that locates Salaam as a
community in a wider structure of positionings and suggests a critical social reading of the spaces that Salaam is constantly producing and reproducing.

In the first section of this chapter I argue that Salaam produces its home and its images of homes through a reterritorialization of Muslim and queer spaces. Salaam’s home is shaped through what I refer to as the dialectic of Islamizing queer and queering Islam within diasporic practices like Eid celebration or Iftar dinners or night parties. This argument is similar to Petzen’s discussion of Turkish queers use of parties and organizations in the formation of spaces of belonging (2004:28). It is also similar to Manalansan’s analysis of Filipino gay men’s use of the Santacruzan performances to negotiate their Filipino and American identities (Manalansan 2003). I have chosen not to divide this section into two separate divisions (i.e. Muslim practices and queer practices) since my argument is based on the impossibility of drawing a solid line between the two spaces. In the second section I discuss the limits of home and the impossibilities of fixing one’s home in one community or another, and how homes are always moving, shifting and switching locations and boundaries, an understanding that Salaam is partly realizing.

**Homing Spaces: Queering Islam and Islamizing Queer**

One of the first activities I attended with Salaam was the Iftar event that Salaam had during the month of Ramadan in November of 2004. It was the first Iftar I ever attended in my life, so I did not know what to expect. The announcement about the Iftar was sent by email and also was posted on Salaam’s website. The event was not open to
the public, and people were welcomed through email-invitations sent to them. Those who wished to come should send a notice that they were coming and they were supposed to be known to the community. In this way Salaam tried to secure a ‘safe’ space where there were no threats of ‘outing’ or no other security issues. A year later, in the 2005 Iftar, Salaam got a specific threat targeting the Iftar, so they had two police officers ‘protecting’ the entrance of the hall. The event of the 2004 (as well as the 2005 Iftar), was held in a church. This surprised me as I had been in Toronto for only three months; coming from a very conservative society I did not think that churches would provide spaces for queer or Muslim-religious events. I attended the Iftar as a volunteer so I had access to the kitchen of the church, where the food was being prepared to be served to the hall. The first image I got when I came to the hall where the Iftar was held, was of a modern Arab wedding, where tables were arranged in straight lines, people sat waiting for the food to be served, and all the attention was drawn towards one spot. In the case of wedding it would be the dancing zone and the table of the newlywed couple. In this case the attention was on the stage where some Salaam members and other groups, like the Muslim Canadian Congress, a progressive Muslim group, would make announcements. About ten minutes before the breaking of the fast Naser asked for the audience’s attention and opened the event by welcoming people and by introducing Salaam, while pointing to the importance of having this Iftar where queer and queer-friendly people could attend. He also welcomed the member of the Muslim Canadian Congress. Naser talked about the necessity of having queer Muslim Iftar that is hospitable to difference, not only in terms of sexuality but also in terms of ethnic and religious difference, as there were many Jews
and Christians who attended the Iftar. Then Naser explained the schedule of the event which began with an Azan, a call for prayer. Then people were invited to the pray area, where, as Naser emphasized, women and men would pray side by side without gender segregation, and a woman would lead the Salat. He also added that people (specially women) could pray with any cloth they wanted and they had the choice to cover their heads if they want to or not. Naser made sure that the message was that everyone was welcome to pray however he or she wished to, since this was part of Salaam’s mandate.

Such practices convey what I refer to as the queering of the Muslim practices. Naser told me how he explained the logic behind having no gender segregation in the prayers to a Muslim gay man who did not want to pray if there was no gender segregation. Naser told the man that the reason for having gender segregation in Islam is to prevent sexual attraction and distraction when men and women are praying. So, in a queer community where men are attracted to men and women to women, to prevent any sexual distraction would be logically by having a woman beside a man and so on. Naser told me this anecdote in a joking tone, yet it made sense to the gay man who was questioning such practice and it also encouraged him to join such unsegregated prayers. Here Naser did not question the argument of having or not having sexual attraction while praying nor he did problematize the idea that attraction might distract prayers. Instead, he quoted the already existing regulation and reapplied it in a queer setting.

The idea of women leading the prayers also elicited some criticisms from people who attended Salaam’s religious events, as Naser told me. He refered to such rejection as sexist and chauvinist since it assumed that women are not, mentally and spiritually,
capable of leading prayers. Rejecting gender segregation and promoting women to lead
the prayers are two key elements in Salaam's queering of the practices of Islam in all of
their religious spaces, which attempt to be inclusive of all differences. The *Iftar* and the
revisiting of Muslim practices that manifest themselves in the prayers and the acceptance
of difference, including secularity, manifest and shape Salaam's conceptualization of
home. For many members of Salaam who came to Canada as landed immigrants or as
refugees, and for those who lived here most of their life since childhood, Salaam's *Iftar*
and other *Eid* celebrations are spaces of home, precisely when such religious observances
are traditionally celebrated with family members and in big community gatherings. What
makes it more of a space of home is not only that is a Muslim event, but it is also an open
space for queers, and as some Salaam members told me, they feel home in being in
spaces where Islam and queer are working together. After the prayer people were invited
to break the fast and many lined up in front of the buffet where South-Asian food and
Middle-Eastern desserts were being served with non-alcoholic drinks.

Along with queering Islamic conceptions and practices, an Islamization of the
queer identity occurs. Queer identities were not dependent only on sexuality, but rather
on a multiplicity of identities and experiences related to ethnicity, religion and
nationality. Many of Salaam's members emphasized their connections to their Islamic
culture as a strong part of who they are (see chapter two). Their queerness is defined and
contested through long journeys of religious and cultural experiences. Their Islam is also
deefined and contested through cultural and political reclamation, especially the increasing
racism post 9/11. Thus, the product of these processes, of reclaiming different queer or
Muslim identities, is also a political one that attempts to break stereotypes that usually assume that queerness tends to be proposing anti-religiosity or Islam proposing anti-queerness. Salaam does not explicitly Islamize its queer identity in the radical sense of transforming queer practices into Muslim practices, but since Islam is considered amongst many of Salaam's members to be a religious and cultural matter, we can speak of bringing a political and cultural conceptualization of Islam into the realm of queer identity.

Discourses on queer and Islam are central to most Salaam members including both those who are religious and those who are not. For those who are religious it is important to find reflections and justifications of their (homo)sexuality in Islam. For those who are not religious, Islam is still an important aspect of their cultural and political identification; they do not feel the need to justify their everyday life or sexuality in terms of the Muslim teachings, but they do feel the need of a political, feminist and queer positive understanding of their Islamic culture.

Discussions on sexuality and Islam are dealt with mostly in the support groups and arranged conferences, lectures on the topic, in general meetings and articles posted on Salaam's website, and sometimes in their Muslim celebrations or events. Support groups are the main space provided for queer Muslims to talk about "hard stuff", as stated on Salaam's website. People who attend the support groups speak of the frustration they meet when dealing with their sexual and religious identities, partly because they have internalized their family's and their societies' perspectives on Islam and homosexuality. They usually claim that they could never question their own religion and the social laws
derived from it. Khaled, Omar, Nadia and others referred in their interviews to how Salaam created spaces where they could question hegemonic teachings in Islam that are related to issues on women, gender and sexuality. Support group meetings are one of those central spaces. I attended several support groups, which I co-facilitated with other members of Salaam, as I was told that they needed more women to co-facilitate in case other women join the support group, which usually does not happen. Most of the support group meetings I attended dealt explicitly with the issue of being queer and Muslim. The discussions were directed to answer the question: how can a Muslim believer be queer, precisely when the general Muslim communities exclude those who are queer among them? In the few meetings I attended I witnessed the difficulties that some queer Muslims have with their (homo)sexuality and their faith. Some did not agree with the idea that Islam can be interpreted as hospitable to homosexuality, and with the argument that the many Islams that exist are based on subjective and culturally specific interpretations.

The work of queering Islamic interpretation through what is referred to as *ijtihad* and *tafseer* (the work of interpretation of Qur’anic text and teaching), follows the work of feminizing Islam by Islamic feminist movements that were formed in the 1980s. Muslim women scholars have always existed in Islamic societies, yet the organization of Islamic feminism emerged at the end nineteenth century as counter discourse to secular feminism that was brought as an external influence to colonized Muslim countries (Badran 2005:6). The re-emergence of a radical new Islamic feminism in late 1980s that reread the Qur’an and the *Hadith* (stories of words and deeds of the prophet Mohammad) brought the debates over Islam, gender and sexuality to another level of *Ijtihad*, (see also Moghadam 144
2002, Saint-Blancat 2002:143). These new feminist movements differ from the old Islamic feminist groups by their radical reinterpretation of issues relating to gender differences and by empowering women through religion. Badran (2005: 13-14) refers to the new Islamic feminists as “gender jihadists”, as they promote the practice of full equality through transformation of a whole Muslim society (also see Omid 2003). Thus, through the jihad in the ijtihad, Islamic feminism has engaged rethinking social and religious norms creating a social transformation through the rereading of the Islamic texts. Queer Muslim movements, like Al-Fatiha in the U.S, Salaam in Canada and Yousif Foundation in the Netherlands have coopted same terminology by introducing the concept of “queer jihad” (see also www.queerjihad.com). If jihad in its Islamic sense means the struggle over the interpretation of the texts, “queer jihad” is the struggle over queer reinterpretations of the texts (both the Qur’an and Hadith). Such reinterpretations emphasize the notion of equality and diversity in Islam, which contains also sexual differences.

I observed two approaches to understanding Islam and homosexuality in Salaam. The first can be described as a secular constructivist approach, and second as religious a interpretive approach, which emerges from religious assumptions and can be related to as ‘a queer jihad’. As a secular person, Faridah views Islam and the teaching of it as derived from and constructed through a specific cultural, political and historical context. She told me about her perspective which she had shared at one of the support group meetings:

I don’t believe in religions. I believe that they were created by men and written by men, and some are positive and designed for the context within which it was written. Maybe in the beginning it was good to tell people not to eat pork, but now
I see it as a force for control. In the [Salaam’s] support group people would say the Qur’an says that homosexuality is evil or sin. I always answer: “Religion is a lot about interpretations”. I usually tell people, who find these texts sacred, that it is open to multiple interpretations, and for those who believe in God (I don’t know if I believe in God the way these people believe in it; I believe that there is a larger force but not larger than us) so I would say to people who believe: “How could we be created if we weren’t meant to be?” I personally don’t care about what religions say. I like some parts of it […] but when it comes to the Islamic text I put the meaning to it. I create the power in it, which is not what these guys in the support group believe in. They have been so much indoctrinated, that there is no way to really reclaim themselves from it.

Faridah’s approach is a secular one. She defines herself as a non-believer and for her Islam is about interpretations and the holy text itself is a product of specific historical-cultural contexts. In being Muslim by culture, politics and heritage but not belief, Faridah does not perceive her queer identity in terms of religious ethics or as ‘paradoxical’ to Islam. Since her life is not confined through the teachings or the ethics of Islam, Faridah’s queer identification could live separately and apart from her religion without questioning such disjuncture. Only recently when she joined Salaam did she learn more on how to “queer” her Muslim identity through understanding Islam from a new perspective (especially after attending Salaam- Al-Fatiha conference in 2002). Similar to Faridah, Ranya and Samer, argue that religions were written by men to serve a specific social order in society; thus, they always already leave marginalized groups outside.

The other perspective in Salaam derives from a religious point of view. It also argues that social and cultural contexts shape the way people understand Islam, but it assumes and believes that the religion itself is not a product of human beings, but of larger forces, yet the interpretation of Islam is socially constructed. Those who hold such
views in Salaam are people like Naser, Khaled and Omar. Their position assumes that homosexuality is not a matter of choice but of nature, and since God is the creator of the universe, He can not create someone to be already condemned in the first place, since, for any of God's creation there is a reason (Hikma). This argument approves of the existence of difference and diversity among human beings. Naser argues that the only place in the Qur’an in which practices of same sex were mentioned is in the story of Lott tribe, yet the sin that this tribe has committed is not homosexuality:

In terms of homosexuality I came to the understanding that there is something wrong in our understanding of the Qur’an. As I became more socialized and I would read the Qur’an, I believe that what the Qur’an talks about is something different than homosexuality. The story of Lott, to me, talks about violating the roles of hospitality and consensual sex. There is nothing consensual in what these men wanted to do with these angels.
Nayrouz: you mean rape?
Naser: Yes exactly, about rape and not consensual sex. The Qur’an said that they were committing a crime that no other people had committed before. But boys have been sticking their sticks in other boys’ bums since the beginning of boys. I don’t think this was invented by the people of Lott. I think scholars who interpret the Qur’an’s story of Lott as a story of homosexuality are actually turning a blind eye to history.

The rereading of the Lott tribe text in the Qur’an is key to reinterpreting how Islam is understood in relation to homosexuality. As Naser and Khaled told me, the Lott tribe story is the only place where same sex practice is mentioned in the Qur’an, and to their understanding the story is about rape and violation of hospitality and not about prohibition of homosexual sex.
Another argument using a similar approach is that God and the Prophet Mohammad allow diversity among Muslims. This diversity is inclusive of sexuality:

As the Prophet Mohammed said, "As there are many breaths that humans breathe, that's as many ways there are to get to Allah." To me, that speaks of the diversity of the human race and not just about the diversity of human spiritual practice. It speaks of the diversity of race, language, religion, class and the diversity of sexual practice and sexuality. (Amina quoted in "Are you Muslim?" by Farzana Doctor, in www.salaamcanada.org/study8.html [No date indicated]).

These two approaches manifest themselves in Salaam’s practices, although the religious approach is the dominant one; this can be seen through the centrality of the religious and spiritual gatherings in the group.

Similar to the support group meetings, general meetings also formulate spaces where notions of Muslim and queer identities are reconceptualized. General meetings bring forward larger issues, mainly informative, on resettlement, health, migration and queer politics. They are more of an open discussion group to familiarize the community with wider centers and activities around queer and immigration. The other space, through which Salaam negotiates and contests Muslim identities and queer identity is Salaam’s website (www.salaamcanada.org/studies.html).

Many of the queer groups in the world today started through the internet, either through creating virtual forums in websites, through chat rooms, or through email groups (Gross 2005:523 and Morton 1995:369)\textsuperscript{34}. One of the advantages of these virtual spaces is in participating in a queer group but expressing one self anonymously with minor risks of being outed. Although Salaam’s website does not have a forum or chat rooms,

\textsuperscript{34} For example the Palestinian queer women’s group, www.aswatgroup.org.
Salaam’s email list allows for similar discussions. The website also has a page of articles related to issues of Islam and queer, where some members of Salaam write about their personal experiences coming along with their sexual and queer identity.

In an article written by an anonymous writer titled “First Fruit of the Prayer” (www.salaamcanada.org/fruitofprayers.html) a woman narrates her story of prayers with the women in her families. She speaks about the domination of women who lead the Salat and who learned and taught Islam through the work of text interpretation (tafseer) in community gatherings. The narrator questions why those remarkable women who were in her life could not be religious leaders or Imams; and why every woman and young girl in her surroundings has witnessed discrimination based on her gender. Her answer, though not explicit, lays in the social conservatism of her society. She speaks of the distance from prayers she developed since asking these questions. She ends her article with her return to prayers after many years keeping alive the memory of those women who led the prayers in her childhood life.

This article explicitly links personal experiences in prayers with larger issues in Islam. Another article titled “Being Queer and Muslim” (http://salaamcanada.org/study9.html) narrates personal identity journey of a Muslim queer. The author, identified as Sami, starts his piece by a reflection on the title, which he argues to be catchy, claiming that being queer and Muslim is a position that he has to deal with on daily basis. His positioning as a queer Muslim constantly leaves him under interrogation; so, he always finds himself educating people and challenging their ignorance and stereotypes they have about Muslims on the one hand, and on queer people
on the other. Being queer, he continues, does not imply that he has to 'turn back' on his religion. Islam is a major part of his life and belief, and queer is who he is, and the two identities can not exist separately.

Supposedly, queer spaces are secular ones, but in the case of a Muslim queer group, such an assumption is challenged. As some Salaam members told me in their interviews many people did not understand how they can be queer and still hold an Islamic faith, which is based on two assumptions; first that Islam can not accept queerness, and second that queerness does not allow an identification with religion. For example, Naser told me that for many Muslims, the minute someone declares that he or she is queer, he or she is not considered a Muslim anymore; therefore, many Muslims claim that there are no queer people amongst Muslims. Tariq, born and raised in Canada to a Muslim Indian family who migrated in the sixties to Canada, told me about the hostility he faces in holding two identities, from both Muslim communities and queer communities and how for him being queer never excludes him from belonging to the notion of *Umma*, or the global Muslim community:

People assume that I cannot be Muslim and gay. Well I am! I still have that basic concept in my head and that is true, I am a living example. Muslims tell us go to hell, but to me God doesn't say that. Although in Islam it is difficult to separate God from religion, I do. The idea that other people cannot have this identity or keep it, it doesn't mean that I don't have a Muslim identity or connection to the idea of *Umma*, because you have to be part of it.

In practices and events like *Iftar* or *Eid* celebrations and through subversive prayers Salaam attempts to reclaim a religious space within queer spaces and vice versa. This does not only happen explicitly in religious activities, but also in queer events such
as pride parades, night parties, and queer conferences. The first night party I attended was in December 2004 I volunteered to sell tickets at the door. Many people from Salaam attended the party, as well as others whom I had never seen in Salaam, and whom I discovered were not Muslims. The music played at the party varied from Arabic dance music to South-Asian and Western dance music. Most people danced to the Western music, but when it came to the Arabic or South-Asian music, I noticed some White Canadians who stood on the side and watched other people dancing, as if this music was not played for them. The climax of the event was a belly dancing performance by a Turkish male to female transsexual, whose name was Nargis. I saw Nargis on other occasions like Eid parties or Iftar dinners. After Nargis’ performance another drag queen performed; she was a Latin American performer, and she sang one song in English and one in Arabic, although she does not know Arabic, as she mentioned. Both performances were manifestations of Middle-Eastern culture. At another party I attended there was an Iranian drag performance. All performers were male to female transsexuals- there was no drag king, female to male transsexual performance, although recently a drag king performer has joined Salaam.

The question of what this type of performance has to do with Islam can be answered in relation to the audience who attends these parties. Since, generally speaking, most Muslims in Salaam belong to either South-Asian or Middle-Eastern (including North-African) cultures, Islam in Salaam ceases to be only a religious space, but is also a cultural umbrella for specific geographical diasporic belongings or origins. Rituals, as Manalansan (2003:136-8) argues, are spaces for negotiating, identities and memories.
The example of Filipino gay men's reproduction of the Santacruzan rituals in New York, shows that rituals are central to the amalgamation of religious as well as secular aspects of Filipino gay men's lives in the diaspora (Manalansan 2003:132-6). Similar to Manalansan, I argue that Salaam's night parties, *Eids* or *Iftar* gatherings are such spaces where Islam is reconstructed as a cultural identity rather than a religious one. Islam is the common shared experience amongst most Salaam members. Some members or participants in Salaam are Jews or Christians; some join prayers and others only attend and watch from the side. Daniel is a Jewish Salaam activist. He attends most religious or cultural events, but he also participates in prayers. On one occasion he explained to me his anti-Zionist political views and his involvement with Salaam, which relates to his principles of social justice, anti-Islamophobia and also to his (Jewish) religious beliefs. Another two pro-Palestinian Jewish filmmakers, who I met in the first Salaam *Iftar*, had the same political perspective and position of solidarity.

*Limits to Homes*

Spaces of *Iftar*, *Eid* celebration, cultural events or Middle-Eastern and South-Asian dance parties are not only spaces where Islam and queer are contested and redefined but also spaces where memories of homes and origins are constructed collectively. Repeating *Iftar* and *Eid* celebrations as they are celebrated in homelands reproduces memories of images of homes. During the *Iftar*, when Khaled called out for the prayer which is usually performed by chanting, Aminah told me that she remembered her uncles and other men in her family who would perform same performance. Khaled's
image and his performances while praying reminded Aminah of her home. Homes are remembered and reproduced simultaneously through the repeating of practices conducted at 'origins' and then reproduced away from the 'origins', yet any reproduction is not merely a repetition but may also be a production of new practices. The subversion of the hegemonic structure of prayers in Salaam, the sexually and religiously diverse audience and the freedom of choice of fasting or praying with no judgment or enforcement, all create new understandings and conceptualizations of Islam in general, and in diasporic communities in particular. These conceptualizations are conditioned by borderzone position between the several communities that Salaam occupies. Except for the Muslim Canadian Congress, no other Muslim groups in Canada were willing to accept participating in Salaam's activities or accept the existence of such a group. Usually there is no direct confrontation between Salaam and other Muslim communities; the only hostile incident that came from other Muslims in Canada were two death threat emails that were sent anonymously to Salaam's email. The emails indicated that what Salaam is doing is against Islam; the death threats were targeting the support group meetings at the 519 Church Street community centre and Salaam's 2005 Iftar. As a response Salaam called the police to investigate the incident but the police could not trace the email and the location it was sent from. So the decision that Salaam took was that people who attend Salaam meeting groups should be known by other members.

Many queer Muslim or non-Muslim Middle-Easterners refused to be part of Salaam. Nadiah told me in her interview that there are many Iranian queer women in Toronto but they usually refuse to be part of any Muslim group in the city regardless of
its politics, since they do not consider Islam as part of their identification. Many of them associate Islam with traumatic experiences they had during the Islamic revolution or with the current regime in Iran. I also met some Arab queers who were not Muslims and they argued that Salaam, in being Muslim, excludes those who are not, even if in practise it is an inclusive community. They argued that by limiting the naming of the community to queer Muslims those who are secular, non-Muslim Middle-Eastern or South-Asian who live or lived in Muslim societies, are all excluded. Although Aminah is an activist in Salaam and she occasionally participates in its activities, she has always been reluctant to join Salaam as a member since she does not feel that she wants to be ‘trapped’ in one category of “Muslim and queer”:

I have issues sometimes because its politic is too liberal, and that is my issue with anything, not just Salaam, any sort of identity based group, I feel trapped. To describe myself as a queer Muslim, even though I may describe myself as so, it doesn’t fully describe me.

Salaam’s attempts to be a home through creating of a space of familiarity that is formed on the basis of the exclusivity of queer and Muslim, paradoxically, creates an uncomfortable space for some diasporic queer subjects who do not want to be confined only by these two identities.

In addition to this exclusivity, Salaam’s formation of homes is fragmented and momentary. Approximately four times a month the group has a gathering, usually for the support groups and the general meetings. Not many people in Salaam show up to the general meetings or support groups. The main active channel of communication within the group is the general email listserv. The other listserv is the coordinator group, where
planning and programming of events happen virtually. Being on both listservs, I felt that most of the communication within Salaam was done virtually and in a sense the whole community also was becoming more and more virtual.

Salaam not only excludes secular queers coming from Muslim origins or non-Muslim queers coming from Muslim societies (i.e. many Arabs), but also, in practice, it does not make the effort to be inclusive to women or transpeople. In August 2005 Faridah contacted me to start a women-trans Salaam group that would attract queer women and transpeople to Salaam. An email was sent to the general email list in Salaam inviting women and transpeople to join this meeting to take place in a restaurant on Church St. in September same year. Around sixteen women and two female to male transpeople attended the event and the newly formed group discussed further actions, meetings or activities. However, ever since that meeting until now, a year and half later, this group has not had any further activities or meetings. The vast majority of Salaam’s members are men, and women are less visible in the community. The larger activities appeal mostly to men. Faridah told me how, for example, dance parties mainly target men in Salaam and not women, drawing my attention to one of the party invitation posters that had an image of a topless Middle-Eastern man and an image of Nargis the belly dancer. This poster, she explained to me, was explicitly directed to men and not women, and besides women always preferred group meetings or brunches over parties. Nadiah also complained on how she felt that there is hierarchy among men and women in Salaam at the level of decision making which she experienced in some conversations with the group coordinator.
Being on the liminal spaces of diverse communities creates fragmentation in Salaam’s ideal of home. Many members of Salaam belong to other ethnic, academic, activist, or religious communities. Such multiple belongings destabilizes conceptualizations of Salaam as a home community or an ultimate space of belonging. Through its events and activities, Salaam attempts to form a home, and such home spaces were mostly expressed, by Salaam members, through metaphors of family. When Naser’s partner, Stephan, was dying of AIDS many people from Salaam came and supported the couple during the months of Stephan’s illness till his moment of death. In the interviews those who spoke of the days they spent with Naser and Stephan discussed Salaam’s involvement in terms of family, where during the last weeks before the death, Salaam stopped almost all of its activities to support Naser and his partner. Some said that before Stephan’s death Salaam was very active and after his death the community’s energy was worn out. Thus, during Stephan’s illness, the conception of Salaam as family was linked to ideas of home. However, after the death, the community was fragmented and it took some months to gather its strength again and return to normal, which proves to some people in Salaam, like Nadia, that the community became more scattered and there is no sense of solidarity or organization. Some people in Salaam, as Tariq told me, stopped volunteering or coming to Salaam because they felt that the organization of events was carried out by same few people. The Iftar of October 2006, for example, was organized at the last minute and happened on a smaller scale, and not many people from Salaam showed up. Some argued that the reason why many people show up at Salaam’s activities, general meetings or support groups and then leave after a month or two is that
some of them join Salaam and become members in the group only to get reference letters to back up their refugee or immigration claims.

As a community, Salaam created a comfortable liminal zone between the larger queer and community and the larger Muslim community but since it is not fully involved with both communities, Salaam’s faces challenges creating substantial social transformations in either one. This can be seen by the lack of outreach and advocacy work within the Muslim or the queer communities. On the one hand, drawing boundaries that separate Salaam from the Muslim communities in Canada creates a ‘safe’ homophobic-free zone; and on the other hand it isolates and contributes to distinguishing Salaam from other Muslims in Canada, which in turn perpetuate the wider Muslim communities perspective that any Muslim queer is ontologically not Muslim. As for social transformation of the queer community, Salaam tries to be engaged in the queer scene in the city. Some explained that there is a danger in being exoticized or patronized, as Samer expressed it in the interview:

The White [queer community] is very patronizing, and their response: “oh, good for you, you are doing this because you are the Muslims who are oppressed?” and “you now become like us more tolerant and liberal”.

Aminah also noticed same attitude:

The White queers say: “oh, that’s it; that is what it means to be queer and Muslim. Educate us about Islam! You are so cool and because you are gays and lesbians we support you but we don’t like those other Muslims really!” I have heard really horrendously racist things about Islam and I think Salaam has to resist being the pet of the White queer community and to challenge their racism. It is a difficult act to play, you are never going to belong, you are never going to be part of the White queer movement and even with progressive Muslim groups, who are
maybe homophobic. Salaam is going to have to struggle over what it means to belong, not to belong and *to never have a home*. [Emphasis added]

Although the majority of members in Salaam report positive relations with the larger queer community, there are no real attempts to engage with it. Salaam’s participation in the Toronto Pride Parade is the only place where Salaam becomes visible in the queer scene among the mosaic of other diverse queer groups. In that sense Salaam isolates itself from the larger queer community as a strategy to keep a distinct and bordered space that is free from homophobic or racist and anti-Islamic attitudes for Muslim queers to live in.

Salaam’s creation of home reproduces the idea of home related to family space and confined to borders that separate it from the outside world. This type of production limits Salaam from developing wider networks among different queer or Muslim communities in the city. As Aminah argued, Salaam has to be ready to never really belong and “never have a home”, rather it exists as fragmentations of homes located in different spaces at different moments.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have attempted to analyze Salaam’s creation of spaces of homes and belonging. First I explored what I referred to as ‘queering Muslim’ identity and ‘Islamizing queer’ identity. In this section I argued that through its practices or *Eid* gatherings, *Iftar* dinners, conferences, or night parties, Salaam attempts to produce its home spaces. In the second section I tried to draw some structural limitations to Salaam’s
position on the borderzone of queer and Muslim spaces. Finally I argued that being in liminal zones can be a safe space; but I also posed the question about the limits of creating home spaces; after all, homes are not necessarily in one location or another, as many Salaam members pointed to me, they are always multiple, everywhere and nowhere.

To many Muslim queers in the city Salaam is a space of familiarity and comfort. However, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, spaces that Salaam constructs are never fully conceived as spaces of homes. The initial idea behind forming Salaam was to relocate and reterritorialize identities that were forced into displacement or (symbolic) exile, into a community space. Home, for many people in Salaam is a safe space where two identities live with no destructive confrontations. For the majority of Muslims in Canada, people who are queer and Muslim are not Muslim, and for the queer community, Muslims who are queer are the ‘progressive’ Muslims who differ from other ‘backward’ Muslims. Homophobia and racism become two major terrains that motivate Salaam to be formed in the first place, and to produce different representations of being a Muslim person or being queer.

Homophobia and racism from both the queer communities and the Muslim communities force Salaam to live on the borderzone of both communities. In that sense they are isolated from direct connections with the larger society. Such a borderzone space can be empowering by being a bridge between Muslims and queers, but it can also be disempowering through its self imposed isolation.
Conclusion: Returns

After a year in Canada, Ranya decided to return to Jordan. Ranya was working for a Jordanian company in Toronto and her work was not developing the way she wanted, so she decided to return and open her own business in Amman. Ranya knew that her return to Jordan would also ‘push’ her back into the closet, yet, as she told me, she has a small queer community in Amman that she would rather be with than in Toronto and feeling alienated from the queer scene. Although she felt comfortable with the ‘freedom’ she had in Toronto in being ‘out’ of the closet, she decided that such comfort can be found within her own society if she manages to negotiate her style of life with the social constraints in her Arab society. In Canada, Ranya was adamant about being out of the closet, as she claimed that this was one of the main reasons why she wanted to live away from her family and society. I am still in touch with Ranya and she told me that she was happy to be ‘home’, close to her friends and culture where she does not feel alienated.

This anecdote illustrates the complexity of notions of belonging, comfort, and home. Ranya’s comfort is not merely related to her singular experience of being queer, but also of being an Arab whose life is largely located in the Middle-East. Ranya preferred to be in the closet again rather than be socially and culturally alienated, although she left the possibility of a return to Toronto open.

Aminah decided to go back home to visit her family in Tanzania and to take her partner with her so she could introduce her to her family. Aminah introduced her partner
as a friend and not as a lover, but as she told me, they knew who her partner really was. The visit home was the closing of a circle for Aminah, where her partner could live where Aminah lived during her childhood and could understand Aminah’s life story through this return.

Alya returned to Turkey for a visit after almost twelve years of refusing to visit her family and country. Alya refused to feel any attachment to Turkey, as she told me that she did not miss her family or the country at all, since her family never accepted her sexual transition. She told me that in Turkey transsexuals are treated badly and she cannot think of living there anymore.

After a year and a half being in Canada I decided to go visit my family for two weeks. My family knew that I lived with a ‘friend’ who had come with me from Jerusalem, but I did not tell them that she was my partner, although they suspected that. My visit home was emotionally intense, full of family and friends’ visits. It was also my return to a reality that I tried to escape from for a while, or a reality I wanted to take a short break from. Coming from Canada I was looked upon as having become a ‘Westerner’. My family and friends constantly asked me if I felt like living in Canada or felt like returning instead, and the answer I would give them was that I was not sure where I would choose to live but I did feel that I wanted to return home and be among them. This wish for a return did not occur to me when I was about to depart for Canada a year and a half ago. I needed to leave in order to wish for a return. After being in Toronto for a while, and after living the queer life outside my homeland, I felt the courage to come back and confess my queer identity to my mother. I did not plan such a scenario nor
did I want to come for two weeks and ‘come out of the closet’ and then return to Canada, leaving them with an open wound. But the feeling of being located in multiple spaces, my family home and my new home in Canada, encouraged me to ‘come out’. I felt safe with the fact that I could always return to my space in Canada in case I was not accepted in my home. My coming out of the closet to my mother was the most significant experience of my whole visit. Coming out to my mother changed my conception of a return. Now, I can imagine a ‘comfortable’ queer life back home, although it is still engraved with social and political struggle for acceptance. My home ceased to be conceptualized as a ‘complete’ exilic space since I can imagine a reality of home ‘back-home’ that is always in the process of being revisited through my arrivals and departures from it. I heard similar stories from people I interviewed in Salaam; that after living a while out of one’s home, the return to original ‘homes’ is backed by the possibility of another ‘return’ back to new homes. This can partly explain why it is vital for queer people living in heteronormative societies to be multiply (dis)located in several ‘homes’, where displacements bring in new ‘re-placements’. I cannot say that Canada is my home, since homes are never experienced in terms of singularity. Homes are always multiple and on the move; they are contested according to the different contexts within which they exist. Experiences and the positioning of queers manifests how exiles are also homes and homes are also exile, and notions of ‘originality’ and ‘authenticity’ of experience cannot be fully reached or arrived at. Queerness is already out of order and out of place, whether in homes or in exiles.
Dayna, a Palestinian lesbian and activist in Aswat expressed the impossibility of locating herself in a 'home', and how she feels a constant sense of being exilic and nomadic. Dayna was born in Palestine and moved to live abroad. Her poem *Exilic Queer* manifests the reality that many diasporic queer people live in:

Exilic in my own self
belonging to the state
of paradoxes,

exilic with a home
that awaits a late
unwanted guest.

This was a long day
a day when my body
disagrees, revolts confiscates
the spaces I thought
to be mine,

scars were left as a tattoo
hinder the travel of
a diasporic queer
whose 'real'
home does not exist.

This thesis was an attempt to highlight the experiences of diasporic Muslim queers, and to argue against some of the existing literature on queer migration that turns a blind eye to marginalized “others” within queer communities, in terms of race, religion, nationality and ethnicity. Stories of queer migration are not merely stories of homecoming, nor are they stories of complete exile. Home, for many Muslim queers, is not a simple entity. For those who were socially and symbolically forced to migrate searching for their spaces of comfort, homes are always on the move between spaces of
cultural familiarity and 'origins' and between spaces of social and sexual familiarity. Exile, for queers of colour, is also a complex experience. The alienation that many queer people feel in their family ‘homes’ transforms such spaces of ‘origin’ into spaces that necessitate exile. Many Muslim queers seek their homes out of their home of origins only to find themselves in exile in the place they choose. One of the ways to negotiate those slippery spaces is to create homes in exiles and to reimagine and remember the countries of origin as home, since they never ceased to be as such. Many Salaam members visit their homes and constantly investigate their feelings towards spaces of origin after living outside their family homes.

In this thesis I have left some issues unresolved, some of which have very important questions that should investigated in further research. Queer identity and Islam were the central theme in this thesis. Gender identities and feminist issues were not explored explicitly. Some women in Salaam criticized the gender hierarchy in Salaam and how men took over the structure and the content of the activities in the group; others criticized the marginalization of transpeople in Salaam. These gender dynamics may provoke further questions on the function of different queer groups, such as: do queer communities work within a framework of gender or feminist consciousness? How can feminist theories on gender conceptualize queer communities and queer practices?

Another topic that could emerge from the material I collected is the idea of constructing a queer identity that is based on Islamic conceptions of sexuality rather than Western-capitalist notions. A central question here might be: Does Salaam challenge
notions of 'homosexuality' or 'queer' identities that derived from North-American queer history and culture?

Another issue I did not focus on and should be investigated in further research is that of Toronto’s Muslim communities’ relations to Salaam, and the changes that are happening within these communities due to social, economic and political factors like globalization, 9/11, or current Islamophobia. Such research would situate and contextualize Salaam’s politics within a wider context of Muslim diasporas. Contextualizing Salaam historically within the context of Muslim queer activism in Canada is also an important topic for further research. Such research might focus on the importance of historical dynamics within the queer and Muslim communities in Toronto in order to understand Salaam today. In addition, situating Salaam within a larger queer global culture poses important questions for further investigation. Other diasporic Muslim queer communities exist in some European countries and in North-America, like the UK, The Netherlands, France and the U.S, and the question that could be proposed here is: What are the relations and the dynamics between Salaam and other diasporic queer Muslim groups and how do they differ given the political, historical, economical and cultural differences? Does Salaam aim to create larger queer Muslim solidarity networks among queer groups and communities in Muslim countries (in the Middle-East, South-Asia, Central Asia or North-Africa)? This produces further questions focusing on access to resources and class hierarchies between Muslim queer communities in Western countries and those in ‘Third-World’ countries: How, in the context of globalization, is
the construction and production of identities and safe spaces of communities related to economic, social and cultural capital?

The gradual virtualization (i.e. becoming more dependent on the internet as the main mode of communication) of Salaam, or any other social community is another topic that should be further investigated. Does such virtualization suggest a dissolving of the community, or a transformation of their practices, especially in the context of late capitalist and individualist societies? Such virtualization also might invoke class issues. Only those who have constant access to internet can be an active part of the community.

The last issue that I chose not to elaborate on is the historical and political understanding of homosexuality in Islam and how (or if) Salaam brings to Islam a new understanding of Islam and queerness. In this thesis, I read Islam as a political and cultural identity rather than merely a religious one. This is not to suggest that religious identity is only a matter of social positioning, because religiosity involves spiritual as well as psychological contexts understood not only in terms of social forces, but personal ones as well. One might argue that Salaam is a secular group rather than a religious one, given its ideology, practices and the social relationship it has with the Western, individualist, and capitalist Canadian society. I took Salaam members’ understanding of religion for granted and did not deconstruct or critically interrogate the logics of such conceptualizations. Further investigation of the topic might ask: how does Islam function in Salaam? Can we understand Salaam’s conceptualization of Islam only in terms of political and social forces or positioning? And, how does diaspora (in particular, living in a Western, non-Muslim, country) transform Muslims’ understanding of Islam?
To conclude, experiences of queer border crossings of homes and national territories are always related to memories and imaginations, and thus they are constantly on the move: located, dislocated and relocated. This suggests a new understanding of human experiences of movement. This is not to suggest that the “globalized” world we live in is borderless or that its borders are fluid, since nation states, through imposing and enforcing migration regulations, reassert and reinforce borders. Although borders are constantly reinforced, homes, exiles and homelands are constantly recreated and reimagined as fluid and as borderless in the experience of queer subjects. There is no one home nor is there one experience of exile, and there is no exile without the concept of home nor a home existing without having any relationship to exile; they are always dialectical and they should be understood and imagined in terms of one another.
Appendix

Informed Consent Form

Nayrouz Abu-Hatoum, MA Candidate
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Title of Project: Salaam: Religious and Political Identity in a Diasporic, Muslim, Queer Community in Toronto.

Project Objectives: My main interest is looking at Salaam’s construction of subjective and collective identities pertaining to sexuality and religion. My theoretical concerns focus on the following questions: How does Salaam reconfigure Islamic religious principles in light of their sexual positioning? Does Salaam create an alternative political or social space in the general queer politics? Finally, how do individuals in Salaam negotiate their diasporic, religious and queer identity with non-Muslim Canadian queers practice?

Please note:
You are not obligated to participate and you can withdraw your participation at any time during the interview, and the data collected will be stored in a locked and safe location. You also have the right to not answer the questions. All information and names derived from this study will be kept strictly confidential and anonymous. This interview will be recorded; you have the right to ask for not recording it.

This research is being conducted under the strict supervision of my supervisor Professor David Murray. It has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Subcommittee (HPRC) of York University and I am obligated to follow the Senate Policy Ethics Review Process for Research Involving Human Participants.

For any further questions you can contact me at nayrouz@yorku.ca. You can also contact the Anthropology Ethics Board at 416-736-5261.

Participant Consent

I fully understand the above statement and I agree to participate in this study. I fully acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent statement and that any questions or concerns regarding my participations in this study can be addressed to my supervisor
Professor David Murray in Social Anthropology at York University: 
damurray@yorku.ca.

Signature of Researcher ___________________________ Date_____________________

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date_____________________

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