Dancing Queens
Queer Desire in Golden Era Egyptian Cinema

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ABSTRACT This article analyzes two popular Golden Era belly-dance films, Sigara wa Kass (A Cigarette and a Glass, 1955) and Habibi al Asmar (My Dark Darling, 1958), through concepts of queer spectatorship, queer time and space, homoerotic triangulation, and queer containment. The analysis centers women, attends to women’s homoeroticism and nonnormative desires, and reads popular film as constituted by and constituting of mainstream conventions of gender and sexuality. It argues that mainstream belly-dance films made considerable space for homoerotic exchanges amid women. Golden Era belly-dance films reveal a rich gender and sexual diversity in Egyptian cultural production, rather than the Orientalist representation of an explicitly homophobic “traditional” Arab culture. In this sense, the article recovers women’s nonnormative and queer legacies within popular Egyptian texts. It does not insinuate heterosexuality as inherent but instead locates possible Arab cultural engagements with women’s queerness that have been overlooked.

KEYWORDS Golden Era film, queer-of-color critique, queer spectatorship, femininity, gender and sexual nonnormativity

This article uses two popular Golden Era belly-dance films to argue that mainstream film in Egypt simultaneously enabled and disciplined nonnormative gendered and sexual behavior, specifically between women. Drawing on queer-of-color critique, I articulate how and to what end the films Sigara wa Kass (A Cigarette and a Glass, 1955) and Habibi al Asmar (My Dark Darling, 1958) portrayed nonnormative gendered and sexual behaviors. The queer possibilities I uncover indicate that on- and offscreen, Egyptian culture was engaged in discussions about sexual behaviors and desires, which may or may not have been legible under Western categories of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity (LGBT).
In studies of the Middle East, the use of queer to describe sexual and gendered nonnormativity is often framed in one of two ways—as a capitulation of Arab cultures to neoliberal identity politics or as a means to discuss organizations and performances of same-sex eroticism that are significant to and emergent within local cultures and histories (Amireh 2010: 635). This is a false binary. The history of colonization and Orientalism alongside the ongoing globalization of economies and cultures makes imagining an Arab subject hermetically sealed from the influence of the West impossible. Same-sex eroticism in Arab cultures is always about local cultures and histories at the same time that it is about the global location of these cultures. My primary concern is to attend to histories and performances of same-sex eroticism. Same-sex eroticism is a valuable and interesting expression of desire in Arab culture but may or may not be codified under a sexual identity like gay or lesbian. I follow precedent set by other scholars of this topic, and first, use queer “not as a field with a delimited object of study (such as homosexuality or even sexuality), but as an analytic, a methodology, a critical sensibility, a conceptual strategy, or a reading practice” (Baron and Pursley 2013: 203). Second, queer names modes of gendered and sexual interactions that resist or challenge heteronormative ideals but are (usually) not codified through a sexual identity (Kuntsman and Al-Qasimi 2012: 2). I include under this articulation of queerness displays of homoeroticism, nonnormative gender performance, and ambiguously oriented lust. The Golden Era was playful with regard to social norms; it was not uncommon to see men and women kissing, women undressing women, women drinking and fighting, and cross-dressing, for example. The two films discussed here demonstrate these flexible engagements with sexual paradigms in the mainstream film industry. In both films, and in the Golden Era in general, we see diversity and nonnormativity in performances of desire that today are uncommon or seemingly impossible. Queerness here is not exclusively or inherently intentional in the production of the film but is found within the reception and interpretation of the spectator. I locate queer possibility in these seemingly normative presentations of women, belly dance, and the Golden Era.

Queering Egyptian and Arab film resists the erasure of queer subjects from national and transnational Arab culture, challenges the notion that queerness threatens “authentic” iterations of Arab cultures, and asserts that queer subjects are neither alien to nor outside Arab cultures (Gopinath 2005: 15). Characters in these two films repudiate the elision of queerness from national and transnational memory. They simultaneously challenge the family and heteronormative sexual order through homoerotic and nonnormative behaviors while buttressing that normative model; moreover, they are central to the world the films construct. As such, my project develops a queer archive within popular Arab texts as a means of making space for queer Arab subjects in the culture.

My project departs from other studies of sexuality in the Middle East in the way that it centers women, attends to women’s homoeroticism and nonnormative desires, and reads popular film as constituted by and constituting of mainstream
conventions of gender and sexuality. Studies of nonnormative sexuality in Egyptian film have often focused on independent film, and within that on the work of men and on work featuring men’s homosexuality (see Hassan 2010; Kiernan 1995; Van Eynde 2015). Texts that focus explicitly on mainstream and Golden Era work also tend to center men, masculinity, and male homoeroticism (see Menicucci 1998). Some work, notably Viola Shafik’s (2006), offers a sustained feminist analysis of gender in popular cinema. Meanwhile, work that addresses belly dance is often ethnographic in nature (e.g., Van Nieuwkerk 2010) or concerned with the transnational nature of the performance, especially when it is framed by Orientalist discourse (see Jarmakani 2008; Maira 2008; Shay and Sellers-Young 2005). I intervene in the scholarship by suggesting that belly-dance films made considerable space for homoerotic exchanges amid women. I argue that Golden Era belly-dance film reveals a rich gender and sexual diversity, one that troubles the Orientalist representation of an explicitly homophobic “traditional” or authentic Egyptian culture. In this sense the article recovers women’s nonnormative and queer legacies within popular Egyptian texts. My aim here is not to insinuate homosexuality as inherent rather than impossible but instead to locate moments to engage with and consider queerness that are overlooked in dominant and hegemonic readings of the texts. Given the Golden Era’s significance to transnational Arab audiences, I suggest that trends within Golden Era films are salient to the many Arab communities that follow and consume them.

The continued significance of Golden Era films to audiences in and outside Egypt is a result of that particular era’s centrality in Arab film and media history. Egypt experienced rapid and expansive film production from the 1940s to the 1960s. It was the only Arab country to develop an industry during the colonial period, with the first company emerging in 1917 in Alexandria. The next twenty years saw a bump in Egyptian production, leading to the establishment of Studio Misr in 1934 and then six other studios; by 1948 the country had produced 345 feature-length films (Shaﬁk 1997: 12). Colonial censorship started in 1947 and ended in 1976, replaced by anticolonial governance that enacted new taboos against sex, politics, and religion (Mansour 2012: 11). Much of the Golden Era work, then, preceded the regulation now placed on Arab film. Its films, featuring men and women kissing, women undressing women, women drinking and ﬁghting, and cross-dressing, would likely not pass today’s stringent standards. In this way the Golden Era was ripe for conversations about social norms. It trains a lens on gendered and sexual discussions at that time — on- and offscreen.

Two-thirds of the films distributed in Arab countries were from Europe and America, while the ﬁnal third were almost entirely from Egypt — making the latter the dominant mode of self-representation for Arabs during the Golden Era (Shaﬁk 1997: 20–21). Many nations, like Algeria and Tunisia, could not begin ﬁlm production until the postcolonial era, their economic markets faltering after struggles for independence. The stars’ appeal exceeded regional afﬁliations, and their ﬁlms
found pan-Arab audiences (26). Egypt and her stars thus composed the image of the Arab world circulated by and in the Arab world. Consider these comments by Said (1999: 34) in his eulogy for Tahia Carioca, the renowned belly dancer:

Most Eastern Arabs, I believe, would concede impressionistically that the dour Syrians and Jordanians, the quick-witted Lebanese, the rough-hewn Gulf Arabs, the ever-so-serious Iraqis never have stood a chance next to the entertainers, clowns, singers and dancers that Egypt and its people have provided on so vast a scale for the past several centuries. Even the most damaging political accusations against Egypt’s governments by Palestinians or Iraqis are leveled grudgingly, always with a trace of how likeable and charming Egypt—especially its clipped, lilting dialect—as a whole is.

Egypt as the center of cultural production and the circulation of Egypt’s exports function to create three viewing audiences for Golden Era work: Egypt, other Arab nations, and the diasporic Arab world. If Arabs left the Middle East during the Golden Era, the Arab films they could access were most likely Egyptian. Even today, movie houses that distribute Arab films rely heavily on Egypt’s classic cinema, perhaps even more so than their contemporary work. A cursory exploration of Arab satellite television demonstrates the primacy of Egypt’s cultural production as well as the lingering attachment to Golden Era work. Of Dish Network’s Arabic Elite Super package, the primary provider of Arab television in the United States, five of the twenty-nine channels feature Egyptian content exclusively. One, Nile Drama, touts itself as the viewer’s choice for classic Egyptian film. Moreover, the channels that are not regionally affiliated, those channels understood as pan-Arab (e.g., Al Arabiya), all explicitly name Egyptian content in their programming descriptions. These same channels populate televisions in homes all across the Middle East as satellite television provides the primary mode of broadcast in the region. Online the Golden Era has its own robust afterlife on Pinterest, YouTube, and numerous other locations.

I have highlighted the dominance of Egyptian film in the virtual and satellite worlds to help explain why I consider the Golden Era a significant transnational Arab presence. With its transnational appeal, it expands the gendered and sexual dialogues of the films and extends the queer longing they express beyond the bounds of the nation and the Arab world and well into its diaspora. The playfulness of the Golden Era, its queer potential, reaches queer audiences within and without the location of its production. As such, it offers a queer history or genealogy within the culture to its queer subjects and viewers.

Reading Queerly
I employ queer and queer-of-color critique to locate and articulate women’s homoerotic and nonnormative behaviors within Golden Era Egyptian film. I refer to queer and queer-of-color critique separately because they represent distinct strains of
critical thought established in US intellectual traditions around queer subjectivity. I recognize that the distinction of color may not translate in locations where whiteness is not dominant. Part of the work of this essay is to offer an example and conversation around what queer and queer-of-color critique offers to Arab studies, and what Arab and transnational Arab studies can bring to queer and queer-of-color intellectual traditions.

My analysis is underwritten by four central concepts: queer spectatorship, queer space and time, homoerotic triangulation, and queer containment. Queer spectatorship or queer reading is first about locating homoeroticism onscreen that may be explicitly integrated into the story as a comedic or cautionary plot point (Doty 1993: 3; White 1999: 2). Second, it entails reading queerly, wherein the viewer’s position as a queer subject produces points of identification, recognition, desire, or connection that might be otherwise unavailable to nonqueer subjects (White 1999: xv). For example, in Impossible Desires Gopinath (2005: 15–17, 21–22) recovers a seemingly “impossible” queer female subject through a queer diasporic reading of Bollywood film. In such practices of queer spectatorship, the viewer reads the film against the heteronormative central plot and actively refuses the dominant narrative in favor of fleeting moments and ephemeral gestures that are by definition insignificant or secondary within the overall film. In the book of the same name, José Esteban Muñoz (1999: 4) dubs this process “disidentification” and understands it as a means of queer world making and survival for subjects rejected by the dominant culture. In conversation with theories of spectatorship, Afsaneh Najmabadi (1999: 219–20) articulates that women often enter and enjoy productions that seem to explicitly disempower or forbid them: they may do so through a fragmentary engagement in which they take in only the positives and discard the negative; women locate in such work a surplus of pleasure, wherein they can be both the object of desire and the desiring subject; and they use the films’ fraught depiction of women to navigate their own anxiety. In the two films I discuss, I underscore the onscreen homoerotic desire between women and the intimacies women share as a form of queer spectatorship and queer disidentification, above and against the heteronormative plot.

Second, this essay invokes the concepts of queer time and space as they enable queer kinships. Queer time refers to how queer people’s social and sexual developments occur against or outside heteronormative time, wherein heteronormative time refers to how heterosexuals are expected to meet benchmarks of “normal” development (e.g., young love in high school, serious relationships in college, marriage proposals and children before thirty-five) (Halberstam 2005: 6). The concept of queer time is useful for thinking about how nonnormatively gendered and sexual subjects are marked as such when they fail to meet these benchmarks—spinsters, childless women, women who marry multiple times, and so on. It is also useful for thinking about kinship patterns in queer communities, wherein the lack of adherence to a heteronormative time line means that queer people develop alternate family and...
kinship structures suitable to life outside normative marriage and reproduction patterns (Eng 2010: 15–16). As I discuss below, queer time and kinship are salient concepts for reading the relationship between dancer Hoda and singer Azza in Sigara wa Kass. Meanwhile, queer space similarly describes how subjects othered from normative culture and publics create subcultures and counterpublics. It also refers to spaces that actively disrupt normative sexual paradigms or can foster nonnormative subjects and behaviors and are thus spaces where queer cultures and kinships might flourish. For example, Gopinath (2005: 25) argues that homosocial home spaces foster homoeroticism between women. Building on this thinking, I argue that in both films nightclubs and belly dance are nonnormative spaces that foster queer kinship and intimacy, especially for women.

Third, in this essay I engage in a flipped reading of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of triangulation from Between Men. Sedgwick (1985: 26–27) describes the tension in American literature and film between two men competing for a woman as one means by which men can negotiate homoerotic desires in a socially sanctioned manner. Women’s bodies are both incidental and central: any woman might function as a proxy for men’s desires, and it must be a woman, to avoid any allegations of eroticism between the men. The presence of the woman substantiates a heterosexual narrative. Writing on the “wiles of women,” Najmabadi (1999: 210–13) asserts the agency of women rather than their flat presence as foils for men’s homoeroticism. Women cast out boys and men from female homosocial spaces as part of an Oedipal psychoanalytic development, and in so doing actively encourage male homosociality and the by-product, homoeroticism. Moreover, the spaces from which they cast out men are domains of female power that “[mobilize] to combat male power” (220). I combine Najmabadi’s and Sedgwick’s approaches to articulate how women’s actions might substantiate or create eroticism between women. I suggest that we can “flip” Sedgwick’s triangle of eroticism between men to a triangle between women. In these films a triangle of eroticism exists between two women and one man; the women’s actions in these triangles serve more than male sexuality. In the flipped triangle, when two women compete for the affections of a man, as Samra and Zakia do in Habibi al Asmar and as Hoda and Yolanda do in Sigara wa Kass, they also negotiate homoerotic tension between women. The man for whom they compete is both incidental and central: it could be any man, and it must be a man to substantiate the heterosexual plot. I make this argument by attending to the dynamics between women in the films. In these triangles, as well as in the friendship dynamic between Hoda and Azza, the intimacy between women is primary and continually supersedes the women’s relationships with men.

Last, scholars seeking evidence of nonnormative gendered and sexual behavior often attempt to locate it through the analysis of punitive and disciplinary measures against those subjects (e.g., Shah 2011; Somerville 2000). In film, subjects might flirt with nonnormative or immoral behavior eventually deemed as such and
discarded through the narrative resolution of the plot. In the case of queer erotic potential, the normative gendered and sexual order is secured through marriage and heterosexual coupling (Freeman 2002: xi; Frye 1957: 182). In *Crip Theory* Robert McRuer (2006: 26–28) demonstrates that queerness and disability are often yoked together and that queer and disabled characters are used to advance the story's major heteronormative plot. I call the process of reordering gender and sexuality through marriage and madness tropes queer containment. I suggest that disciplining of women in the films both shores up the heterosexual narrative and reveals that it requires shoring up. That is, the need to discipline the nonnormative characters in the films evidences their nonnormativity. In *Sigara wa Kass* a “crazy” stage manager is the primary site of queer containment, and in *Habibi al Asmar* two nonnormative characters die to make way for the appropriate heterosexual union. By attending to the flirtations with nonnormativity, those moments, ephemeral, marginal, and gestural though they may be, are valuable to a queer reading, and to queer spectators, beyond and against their heteronormative resolution.

From the rich archive of Golden Era production, I focus on the films *Habibi al Asmar* and *Sigara wa Kass* for several reasons. First, both are belly-dance films about belly dancers. This allows us to consider common tropes about belly dance—a traditionally feminine performance genre—as a site for the configuration of Egyptian femininities. The films use belly dance, which also fosters female homosociality, to comment on expected norms for Egyptian women, sometimes refusing and at other times reinforcing those norms within the films’ overall plots. Second, both films feature multiple popular Egyptian performers: *Habibi al Asmar* places iconic Golden Era dancers Tahia Carioca and Samia Gamal in their only film together, while *Sigara wa Kass* features Gamal alongside singers Kouka and Dalida. The combined star power in each film guarantees the films’ popularity at the time of production. Third, both are still in circulation within and outside Egypt. As noted earlier, Golden Era work is still played routinely on Arabic channels in the Middle East and via satellite outside it; these films are also available on YouTube and from online retailers, increasing their circulation. Finally, the stars of the film, particularly Gamal, Carioca, and Dalida, remain transnational favorites, with afterlives online and outside Egypt.

Throughout my analysis of *Habibi* and *Sigara*, I point toward scenes, exchanges, and narrative arcs within both films that feature queer time and space, homoerotic triangulation, and queer containment. These concepts are enabled by and are examples of a reading practice or spectatorship explicitly engaged in reading against the heteronormative narrative in favor of developing points of dis/identification, desire, connection, or recognition for queer audiences. The practice of queer spectatorship and disidentification is at work in the following sections on queer space and time, triangulation, and containment.

*Sigara* follows dancer Hoda (Samia Gamal), who leaves dance to marry a doctor, Mamdouh (Nabil al Alfi), whom she meets while performing. Hoda becomes
jealous of Mamdouh’s head nurse, Yolanda (Dalida), and turns to alcohol for comfort. With the help of her best friend, fellow performer, and former roommate Azza (Kouka), Hoda narrowly escapes dying, and losing her husband and child, in a house fire she has caused. A secondary plot is Azza’s attempt to marry, first a failed attempt to her and Hoda’s former stage manager (no name given) and then successfully to a friend of Mamdouh’s, Omara (Seraj Munir).

Habibi al Asmar (1958) follows two women, Samra (Samia Gamal) and Zakia (Tahia Carioca), as they negotiate love and money in 1950s Egypt. Samra is a baladi (country) girl living in her father’s home and engaged to her childhood sweetheart, Ahmed. She dreams of dancing onstage with Zakia, her next-door neighbor, an older single woman who works in Zamalek. Under Zakia’s influence, Samra meets and marries a wealthy businessman, Rostom, ending her long courtship with Ahmed and cutting ties with her birth family. With Zakia’s help, Ahmed seeks revenge. Ahmed, Zakia, and Samra eventually uncover Rostom’s illegal activities, and Rostom commits suicide to avoid capture by the police; Zakia suffers a fatal gunshot wound protecting Ahmed. Ahmed and Samra are reunited at the end of the film.

Queering Space and Time: Dance as a Source of Nonnormative Configurations

Dance is a central site of conflict and conflict resolution in the two films under discussion. Song and dance numbers in musicals are often scenes that address excess emotion and conflict not easily integrated into the narrative (Knight 2002: 14–17). In Popular Egyptian Cinema Shafik (2006: 166–67) discusses how women’s dancing bodies in particular are locations at which moral, cultural, and gender conflict is raised and resolved. I argue that part of the excess rendered in song and dance scenes in these films is a nonnormative, homoerotic tension between women. Both films feature actresses who are also dancers and singers outside the film industry: Gamal and Carioca as the former and Kouka and Dalida as the latter. For women, public performances of dance and song are themselves highly signified practices in Egyptian culture and in Arab culture more broadly. In her study of female performance in Egypt, Karin Van Nieuwkerk traces how performers understand and experience gender expectations as they pursue what many deem A Trade like Any Other. Van Nieuwkerk’s (2010: 129) qualitative research revealed that women’s social status rested largely on the kind of performance and for whom and where they performed. Public opinion seemed to designate musicians most respectable, followed by singers, actors, folk dancers, and belly dancers. The venue of women’s performance was also significant: wedding singers were more reputable than nightclub performers. The nightclub, catering to men alone rather than families, serving alcohol, and inviting intimacy between patrons placed performers in an already nonnormative space with regard to gender and sexuality; it threatened heteronormative family and religious values. Hoda and Zakia are nightclub performers in Sigara and Habibi, respectively.
As dancers in nightclubs, Hoda and Zakia occupy nonnormative subject positions. The position of dance and the nightclub as antithetical to heteronormative time is rendered explicit in *Sigara*. Hoda works at the Casino al-Galaaʾ. In it she meets Mamdouh; Mamdouh proposes but will marry her only if she gives up dancing and her stardom. Thus the space of performance is read as incompatible and mutually exclusive to family and respectable marriage. The nightclub offers queer rationalities against biological or patrilineal kin structures: Hoda has no birth family in the film, and we know nothing of her life prior to the stage. The only person with whom Hoda is family or familiar is Azza, who sings during Hoda’s performances, and they live together. The Casino al-Galaaʾ brings the women together and offers avenue for homosocial kinship between the performers. Their kinship occurs within and against the nightclub as a space of heteroerotic fulfillment in which women dance and sing for audiences of men. Obviously, dance and performance lend themselves to a more readily available reading involving men’s spectatorship as the central purpose of the nightclub. My argument has no need to dispense with this reading. The nightclub may have as its purpose men’s heteroerotic fulfillment and simultaneously foster intimacy between the women providing it. In short, normative and queer modes of kinship and spectatorship coexist.

In *Habibi* the charge against performance is made ad hominem: figures that emerge from the world of dance are of questionable moral character, and their failures are duly punished. Zakia opines a position of sexual freedom that risks corrupting the hero of the film; she is also responsible for corrupting Samra by introducing her to the nightclub scene against her parents’ and fiancée’s wishes. Rostom meets Samra at the nightclub during one of Zakia’s performances. Rostom is a criminal, a jewel smuggler, who interrupts Samra’s *baladi* story line when he marries her, ending her engagement to her longtime fiancé, alienating her from her birth family, and removing her from her neighborhood and country. That Zakia and Rostom are corruptors of the sexual order — by and through their rejection of cultural norms for femininity, masculinity, and heterosexual romance — is further emphasized by the disciplining of the figures in the resolution of the film’s conflict. Both characters die, and they must, to reunite Samra with her erstwhile fiancé and the film’s heteronational hero, Ahmed. Finally, the staging of the nightclub underscores its seediness: unlike the well-lit scenes of Samra and Ahmed’s neighborhood of flowers and smiling food vendors, the nightclub is dark and hazy. We rarely see characters’ faces; they are turned toward the stage and obscured by cigarette smoke and drinking glasses. Characters in these spaces also dress in typical Western attire, while those in the neighborhood wear *thawbs* and *abayas*. The nightclub thus gives way, especially for women, to more flesh and more visible figures. This styling challenges the performance venue and performers’ respectability, much as Van Nieuwkerk described. The visual rhetoric of the club, and who is found in it, is positioned against conservative and heteronormative arcs.
Another way to illustrate how dance and performance venues challenge the heteronormative order is to examine two fantasy dance sequences, one from each film. Both films use fantasy sequences to imagine alternative time lines for the characters of Hoda and Samra. In Sigara Hoda has two fantasy sequences: the first at the time of her departure from the Casino al-Galaaʾ. The second takes place after Hoda and Mamdouh’s relationship has foundered, and Hoda fantasizes about returning to the stage. In both sequences, dance is the vehicle and the object of fantasy, against the rather mundane action happening in real time.

At the time of her second fantasy arc, Hoda is drunk and mourning her rejection by producers and directors unwilling to bring her back as a dancer. They have rejected her on the advice of her friend, Azza, who is certain that Hoda’s return to dance will end her marriage. Disappointed, Hoda stumbles into the Casino al-Galaaʾ and witnesses Azza singing. Azza is her former stage partner, who has sung to accompany her in previous scenes. Azza mesmerizes Hoda, who imagines herself the object of Azza’s song, dancing alongside her friend. While Azza sings the titular song of the film, Hoda is transformed from her pedestrian clothing into dance costuming. The camera repositions us to view Hoda through Azza, repeating camera cuts from previous song and dance scenes between the two. We, like Hoda, imagine her return to the stage with Azza. During the scene Hoda’s dance backdrop fluctuates from the nightclub, to a Spanish flamenco hall, to a desert with cacti, to a balcony with other Egyptian-style dancers, and finally back to the nightclub. The multiple backdrops speak to Hoda’s longing for life beyond her marriage to Mamdouh, to the difference and richness her performance career could bring. Through dance Hoda transcends space and time and her heteronormative life. When the number ends, Hoda is back in the audience, bowing. She sheepishly realizes that her dance has been but a fantasy, which prompts her to drink more. She stumbles out of the nightclub and passes out on a stranger’s front steps. When she wakes up, she is in another man’s bed. The dance, the alcohol, and her longing for something more lead her well outside the appropriate model of heterosexual behavior and very nearly into immoral territory.

Like Sigara, Habibi features two fantasy sequences. The first is between Samra and Zakia; the second occurs after Samra has learned that her husband, Rostom, is a jewel smuggler. The dream scene opens on a long hallway with a domed ceiling and open windows along the left and right sides. It is a fairly dark background, and the hallway is lit just enough for us to see Samra enter from the left, wearing a fitted ball gown, elbow-length gloves, two sheer scarves draped over her shoulders like a cape, and a small tiara. She walks all the way to the back and begins dancing forward and then back. At first she is alone, but when she reaches the end of the hallway for the second time, men in black suits start appearing at the open windows and attempt to grab her as she walks by. Each time she advances in the frame, new men appear, until there are six of them pawing at her from all directions.
When she tries to flee the hallway entirely, the men step into it from the windows and stop her movement. Eventually they surround her, and she twirls between them looking for an escape route until she passes out. When she awakes, she is back in her childhood neighborhood. There are stone steps and potted plants and a rustic-looking water fountain. Samra is in a new dance costume. Rather than the sleek evening wear of the first phase of the dream, she is wearing a belly-dance costume. Here she is smiling, and her movements are light and fluid instead of sharp and frenetic. Around her, several men are wearing abayas and hattas. They are playing instruments instead of smoking, their presence encouraging rather than threatening. After Samra dances for a bit, Ahmed, her former fiancé, enters the scene, wearing his suit. She dances for him and to him, and they embrace. Just as he puts his hands around her face as though to kiss her, we hear a gunshot and he crumples. The scene cuts back to Samra in the present, waking up with a start.

In both halves of the dream sequence, dance signals Samra’s moral conflict. In Rostom’s world of evening gowns and tiaras, dance signifies danger. The longer she remains in the scene dancing, the more ominous it becomes and the more the men encroach on her space. In Ahmed’s world of hattas and robes, dance brings her close to kissing a man to whom she is not married, despite their history. A man she has betrayed. Indeed, her betrayal causes her to imagine Ahmed’s death in the dream—a death he suffers in proximity to Samra’s dancing form. In both halves of the dream, dance plays up the anxiety and danger between Samra and the men in the film, and in both, her relationships distinctly fail to achieve a heteronormative ideal.

So far this section has articulated how dance and performance spaces create opportunities for queering time, space, and relationality by virtue of their antithetical positioning with regard to heteronormative time, space, and intimacy. Now I pursue this argument by examining how dance enables a homoerotic exchange between women and, later, how women’s relationships in the film take primacy over their relationships with men. There are three scenes in Sigara where homoerotic exchanges occur between Hoda and Azza. The first is the first performance sequence between Hoda and Azza at the Casino al-Galaa. In it Azza is already onstage, softly chiming finger bells as Hoda emerges to instrumental music. When Hoda appears in the foreground, Azza follows her first with her gaze and then physically, singing a song whose lyrics praise Hoda’s beauty and grace. Azza sings that her heart belongs to Hoda: “My heart is hers alone . . .” During these lines the shot moves to a close-up of Azza’s face, and she gazes adoringly at Hoda. Although men are onstage and in the audience, Hoda repeatedly meets Azza’s gaze. Hoda turns her body to Azza as she undulates her hips and moves her arms. Many times men execute the singing portion of such performances. Here Azza replaces the male lead and usual love interest. This queering is enabled in part by their performances of femininity. Both women are ornately dressed, wearing makeup and hair extensions. Azza’s femininity enables her to touch Hoda during the dance, which would be in poor taste if a male
singer did it. While Hoda performs for a roomful of men, on a stage with some male performers, only Azza touches her. In the space of performance, the women’s performance to, with, and against each other can be read erotically. Azza’s attention to Hoda’s features, her testament to her in music, and the intimate touch she gives Hoda — standing behind her, resting her hand on Hoda’s hip — produce Azza as the desiring subject and Hoda as the object. The camera keeps both women in the frame simultaneously, never allowing the viewer to forget that the performance happens between them first and to the audience second. Indeed, the only interaction we have with the audience, in a four-minute song-and-dance sequence, is a three-second shot of Mamdouh, whose gaze rests on Hoda. We see him just before Hoda dances to a musical interlude in the song; I suggest that the temporary recession of Azza’s singing allows Mamdouh to make an appearance but that, again, his desire is secondary to Azza’s in order and scope. The stage not only enables but also necessitates Hoda and Azza’s performance of desire for each other. Mamdouh’s presence, despite the seemingly heteroerotic cabaret scene, takes a secondary position to the interplay. At best, his desire and the desire of the other patrons are enabled and enacted through the female presence of Azza. Still, the primary dialectic is Azza and Hoda.

The second moment that stages homoeroticism in the film is Hoda’s farewell performance for the Casino al-Galaa’. The scene directly follows a conversation Hoda and Azza have had at their apartment before bed, in which Hoda agonizes over leaving show business for a man. This scene ends with Azza’s face pressed against a pillow, praying that God will send her love. In the scene that follows, Azza watches Hoda perform her farewell dance from the wings. The stage manager follows Azza and gives her tokens of his affection. Undistracted, Azza rejects them. Instead, she watches Hoda, mesmerized. Because Hoda’s dance is cut in immediately after Azza’s dream of love, the audience can read Hoda as Azza’s wish fulfillment; this reading is affirmed by Azza’s response to the stage manager’s come-on. The audience of the cabaret appears only when the performance is over; the main audience, and the person with whom the viewer identifies, is Azza. She becomes the conduit of desire for Hoda; like her, the viewer is enchanted with Hoda. The fact that Azza is Hoda’s actual and only audience further queers this fantasy scene: desire is conducted homoerotically through the filter of Azza; thus the scopophilic gaze is arrested from men. Azza is not here, nor was before, rendered as the masculine subject, however. She remains as hyperbolic in her femininity as Hoda, and her longing for her fellow performer does not come from occupying a man’s social position or affect. In fact, femininity is centered in the appearance of both women and is the means by which Azza cares for and interacts with Hoda. Their shared femininity is what allows for their intimacy. The similarity in their identity positions enables the enactment of desire.

The third scene that fosters an unusual erotic encounter in Sigara is the fantasy farewell dance itself. It is unlike previous dance scenes that emphasize eroticism between women or the refusal of heteronormative arcs. Instead, it fosters
the eroticism of Hoda to herself. Hoda’s farewell dance is steeped in fantasy. She enters a room full of ornate chandeliers and mirrors. She is wearing a rather plain costume, akin to dresses she wears later. She pauses in front of a mirror, and the screen blacks out. When the lighting is restored, Hoda’s wardrobe changes, and she wears a provocative costume with multiple scarves that elongate and exaggerate her movements. A voice-over tells us that Hoda is performing at the Casino al-Galaaʾ, but the only visible audience for her phantasmic performance is Azza; the stage manager is not even watching. In Hoda’s fantasy there is no audience; indeed, she seems unaware of Azza. For Hoda, there is only dance and the pleasures of dance. The scene is almost narcissistic as she revels in herself. Hoda’s attention to herself renders her performance nonnormative insofar as the production of desire is aimed at her, rather than for men. I stress the narcissism of the moment not to mark narcissism as a queer attribute but to note the ways that the performance space again has allowed alternate geographies of desire to emerge, geographies that disrupt the map of heterosexual desire and underscore the cabaret and club as spaces that challenge heteronormativity. Moreover, they offer a vision of the dancers that has not yet been noted—the pleasure in dance as dancers, rather than a means to an end, an index of female corruption, or whatever else may be written on the dancer’s body.

In Habibi dance similarly fosters erotic exchange between Samra and Zakia. Two scenes illustrate this argument. In the first, Samra, dressed for bed in her room, gazes longingly at her record player. As she watches the record spin, a small figure appears on the player and begins to dance. The figure is Zakia, and she is wearing a belly-dance costume that sits low on her hips and wraps around her breasts in halter-top fashion; Samra watches her intently. Then a second figure appears. This one is Samra herself, also dressed in a belly-dance costume, wearing her hair cropped shortly against her neck rather than in braids. In a previous fantasy sequence Samra danced with her braids and nightgown. But with Zakia, she undergoes a haircut and costume change. The two apparitions dance with each other while Samra watches. At first they take turns, one dancing while the other watches; then they simply dance together. The camera zooms in on each apparition’s face so we can see the look of admiration for the movement of the other; then it pans away to Samra’s face a couple times while she continues to watch, sighing with pleasure and smiling slightly. Finally, the two figures disappear, and Samra is left staring at the record player, which has started to skip. But Samra, enchanted by something only she sees, does not notice.

In this scene the object of Samra’s desire initially appears to be Zakia; her pleasure at Zakia’s presence is not intuitively around Zakia’s dancing but around Zakia herself, performing for her eyes alone. Even Fantasy Samra, when she appears, is taken with Zakia’s movement, shaking her head in disbelief at Zakia’s virtuosity. Then the fantasy becomes about the camaraderie and kinship between the two women as they dance together. This reading underscores the female homoeroticism in the film, where Zakia and Samra perform and dance for each other before their
bodies turn outward for the other spectators. That the primary spectator, Samra, conjures this fantasy is evidence that her desires are somewhat unruly and non-normative. This evidence is corroborated by her mother, who admonishes her for wanting to see Zakia, for wanting to dance in public, and for dancing in her room to her music in the first place.

The second scene occurs at Zakia’s nightclub, where Samra has accompanied her against her parents’ and fiancée’s wishes. Zakia first appears onstage in the shadows, her arms raised and draped with scarves, before the lights come up, and she begins to dance. The camera pans between her performance and Samra watching from between two curtains in the wings. Samra’s pleasure at Zakia is physical; she executes a couple of her own dance moves with glee. When the number ends, Zakia exits to find Samra and kisses her not on the cheek but, unusually, on the mouth. This is not a common mode of greeting between women or between men. Between friends or relatives of the same sex, kisses are restricted to cheeks. Lip kisses are restricted to committed, romantic relationships. This exchange positions Zakia and Samra in homoerotic tension with each other, physically staked through dance.

Thus in both films performance—and dance specifically—offers a venue to elaborate homoerotic tension between women. Moreover, the films enable homoerotic desire by making the relationships between women the primary intimacies of the film, over and against the presence of men or a heteronormative plot.

**Between Women: The Primacy of Women’s Relationships**

Though both films use love triangles to develop narrative tension, the relationships between Hoda and Azza in *Sigara* and Samra and Zakia in *Habibi* take primacy over their relationships with men. Though the films end with heterosexual marriage plots firmly in place for Hoda and Samra, their intimacy with Azza and Zakia dominate the overall narratives. If anything, the men offer continued points of contact for the women to navigate their relationships with each other. In *Sigara* the establishing shot of the film places Hoda and Azza in communion. It opens by panning to the outside of the Casino al- Galaa, where a sign features their images facing each other. Azza’s Tunisian status becomes important, because as a Tunisian, she can reside in Egypt only six months at a time on a visa. Inside the club a waiter brings a drink to Hoda as she peers nervously through the stage curtains. Azza comes to find Hoda, and they peer together through the curtain at Mamdouh. Together, they reverse the male gaze, and Mamdouh appears as the scopophilic object of desire, even insofar as he is framed by the dark color of the curtain. Mamdouh offers a point of commonality that underpins their proximity. The stage manager disrupts their scene of camaraderie when he calls the “girls” to prepare for their performance. Unnamed throughout the film, the stage manager fawns over Azza, but she rejects
him, closing her dressing-room door in his face. Her dismissal of him and her attention to Hoda are repeated throughout the film and underscore the primacy of the two women’s relationship over the relationships of the women with men.

Hoda and Azza’s intimacy is further demonstrated later in the film. After their marriage Hoda and Mamdouh’s life is told through montage. Mamdouh, using Hoda’s money from performance, builds a hospital and becomes a top-notch surgeon. Meanwhile, Hoda gives birth to a little girl she names Azza (I will refer to her as Azza Jr., as the younger of the two Azzas in the film), cementing her former performance partner and roommate’s significance to her. We do not witness this transformation but merely catch up with characters three to four years later, based on the age of the child. It is similar to the earlier fantasy sequence wherein Mamdouh appears only when Azza is not singing; much of Mamdouh and Hoda’s relationship takes place offscreen or in montage. In this way Hoda’s heteronormative role as wife and mother happens offscreen, relegating Hoda’s relationship with Mamdouh to a nonprimary position.

The triangle between Hoda and Yolanda over Mamdouh is in fact another reinforcement of Hoda’s relationship with Azza, and vice versa. In a moment of jealousy over Yolanda’s deliberately misleading characterization of her relationship with Mamdouh, Hoda turns to alcohol. When Azza comes to check on her, she is already drunk. Azza attempts to help Hoda into bed. When Hoda tries to remove her own clothes but becomes tangled in them, Azza intervenes, undressing her carefully. Eroticism and intimacy between Mamdouh and Hoda never occur onscreen. What eroticism the heterosexual couple lacks is supplanted with homoeroticism between Azza and Hoda. Hoda’s body becomes a site of pleasure for the viewer, who watches her disrobe, and is enacted through Azza, who finishes removing Hoda’s clothing. As in the dance scenes above, Azza becomes the conduit for the viewer’s desire of Hoda. She does so without assuming a masculine position; indeed, she can do so only from the safety of her femininity.

The primacy of the intimacy between Hoda and Azza is perhaps most readily evident in Azza’s marriage plot. Azza explicitly uses Omara to stay close to Hoda. Through the film Azza has bemoaned the lack of love in her life, despite repeatedly rejecting suitors: first the stage manager and then a friend of Mamdouh’s, Omara. At a party Mamdouh throws for Hoda, Azza begins actively interviewing men to marry because her visa is about to expire, and she does not want to leave Egypt for three months to renew it. She goes from man to man, dismissing them when she realizes that they are not Egyptian and thus cannot solve the visa problem. In a bind, she forces Omara to kiss her. By forcing intimacy, she manipulates him into doing the “honorable thing” and marrying her. Until this point Azza has not worried about maintaining her visa and has rejected multiple Egyptian suitors, including Omara. Azza’s primary concerns, finally compelling her to marriage, are to remain close to Hoda and to secure Hoda’s happiness, which she is willing to do by any means
necessary: fixing Hoda’s marriage to Mamdouh, marrying an Egyptian to stay in Egypt, and at one point physically assaulting Yolanda.

It should be clear how Azza’s behavior could be read queerly in the context of the film. I want to pause on Hoda, who mostly serves as the object of Azza’s desire, while her own desire is most often geared toward the stage and the acclaim that it brings. There is one moment that disrupts this mapping. When Hoda wakes up the morning after the party, Mamdouh, Azza, and Azza Jr. are gone. She runs through the house screaming, “Azza, Azza!” but it is not clear if she is looking for her child or for her faithful friend. We might be inclined to read this as concern for her daughter, but queer spectatorship invites us to indulge in the moment of confusion. Azza Jr. appears onscreen very little, perhaps three minutes total. Hoda has spoken of her not at all. The child is named for Hoda’s former roommate and longtime friend. It is reasonable that Hoda would wake wanting her friend over her daughter. After all, what has the daughter done for her lately? Azza could easily inspire as much, if not more, longing.

As in Sigara, the relationship between women takes primacy over other relationships in Habibi. The first real-time interaction between Samra and Zakia occurs after the fantasy sequence in which Samra imagined Zakia dancing for her, herself dancing for Zakia, and themselves dancing together. Samra opens her window to find Zakia waiting for her — her fantasy come to life. They converse about Zakia’s night at the club, and Samra wishes that she could come to see Zakia dance. Zakia promises to sneak her out the following night and encourages Samra to take up dance herself. That is, Zakia promises a night on the town that will remain secret from Samra’s family. Though their secret relationship is indicative of its unacceptable nature because of its proximity to dance, it is also marked by the framing of Zakia as an overall unsavory character with whom Samra is advised not to associate by her family and fiancé, though she does anyway. After Samra is disciplined by her father and argues with her fiancé about her interest in dance, she continues to sneak out of the house to see Zakia.

When Samra arrives at the club to watch Zakia dance, she is as entranced of her as Azza is of Hoda. As Samra watches Zakia, Rostom watches Samra. He asks the club’s manager about her, and together they approach her. But Samra spurns their conversation and continues to watch Zakia; when they attempt to touch her and claim her attention, she snaps at them and puts further physical distance between them. Her disinterest in the men and her focus on Zakia are manifest in her words and body language. Though the scene imagines heterosexual desire from Rostom to Samra, Samra herself upends it and asserts Zakia’s centrality to her narrative. As such, her relationship to Rostom is staked out only through Zakia, and, by the same token, Zakia’s relationship to Ahmed is enacted through Samra.

Infatuation with Zakia subverts Samra’s heteronormative relationships and prioritizes their kinship over that of her biological family and her heterosexual
betrothed. She repeatedly relies on Zakia's counsel and company over that of her established kin and romantic relationships. She goes to the club to watch Zakia against her father's and fiancé's wishes, she enjoys watching the other woman dance, and she agrees to a ride home from Rostom only because Zakia will be there and because Zakia encourages her. Indeed, Samra overthrows her biological family and her fiancé on Zakia's counsel. She marries Rostom on Zakia's advice, against her engagement to Ahmed. Again, it is not that Samra marries Rostom but loves Zakia. Rather, the point is the heightened, often primary, intimacy between the women and the means by which it offers an alternate plot or narrative alongside the heteronormative one. Whatever we imagine Zakia's motives to be, Samra's affection for her goes beyond neighbor, student, or friend.

In both *Habibi* and *Sigara* the relationships between the women are fundamental not only to the plot but also to the character's development. In both, women display loyalty and affection to other women that precedes and supersedes their relationships to men. When we couple this primacy with the eroticism between women, we begin to hear the queer chords of the films. Though I have suggested that these queer longings are available through a position of queer spectatorship, it is not only from a queer viewing position that we can understand the nonnormative intimacies erupting onscreen. Additionally, we can see them in the ways that the films respond to those eruptions.

**Managing Nonnormativity: Processes of Queer Containment**

To undermine queer ruptures and sustain the heteronormative plot of the films, characters who most readily symbolize those ruptures are disciplined or disparaged. In *Habibi al Asmar* it is Zakia. In *Sigara wa Kass* the two characters subject to this process are Azza and the stage manager. In the film Azza and the stage manager invoke a queer pathology insofar as their mental instability is conveyed through their gendered and sexual performances. It is only against and through their abjection that the heterosexual couple can survive. Azza's affected (alongside the stage manager's seemingly actual) madness is used as a tool to produce and buttress heteronormative relationships. As I noted earlier, Azza often discusses love but has routinely rejected Omara and the stage manager as suitors. However, Azza not only refuses Omara after his initial proposal but convinces him that she is crazy to put him off marrying her. Azza uses mock insanity to escape normative heterosexuality, and her person is thus doubly queered by her supposed madness and her avoidance of men. Even without the use of madness, the absence of heteroromantic relationships in Azza's life reads queerly: her refusal to pursue men and the absence of even one reasonable suitor in the years that the film spans (about five) highlight her unusual single status. Azza's queer potential thus is marked both by her onstage eroticism with Hoda and by lack of heterosexual relationships. Until her decision to
stay in Egypt with Hoda, she has no intention of marrying for love, desire, or even money. She is really concerned only with national status, the necessary requirement for staying with Hoda.

Azza’s devotion to Hoda is such that she is willing to make the ultimate sacrifice: marry the stage manager who has loved her for years, the same stage manager she has routinely rejected. When she informs him that she will marry him, the manager is at first ecstatic. When Azza leaves the scene, he faints. The next and final time we see him is in a hospital room in drag, dressed as a hajja, or older woman. He is even slapping his palms together in a gesture attributed to worrying women. I suggest that the stage manager’s drag has three functions. First, it marks the possibility of a heterosexual union as threatening: the stage manager is so overwhelmed by the prospect of marrying Azza that he “becomes” a woman. Since Azza has never assumed a deviant gender role in the film, it seems suspect to read the stage manager’s gender variance as a response to her gender performance and to locate it instead around the threat of sexuality. It might be possible to read his transformation as a mode of identification with the object he desires; after all, it is the similarities between Azza and Hoda, their shared femininity and positions, that allow for their intimacy. Perhaps the actualization of the stage manager’s desire is not a sexual union with Azza but an emulation of her gender performance. In either case, what is not desired is heterosexual coupling. Garay Menicucci (1998: 34) outlines two possible reasons for men dressing as women, which became a recurring trend during the Golden Era, in Egyptian film. He argues that cross-dressing often introduced questions of class and that cross-dressing was persistently and explicitly tied to homosexuality in men. If Menicucci is correct, we can reaffirm how the stage manager’s transformation reflects back on Azza. His infatuation with her and his subsequent terror marks Azza as queer by association. When Azza gives in to the request he has made throughout the film, the request is revealed as more complicated than marriage. Our understanding of the stage manager’s motivations may be unclear, but the results of his decisions mark his and her nonnormativity.

Second, the scene reinscribes queerness as pathology. Azza has already done this throughout the film by avoiding marriage, with “insane” behavior, and the presence of the stage manager in the hospital for the “mental illness” of cross-dressing solidifies it. The pathologization of the stage manager overshadows Azza’s queerness through its visibility, and in some ways she is repaired through his blatant nonnormativity. His body becomes the tangible site of queerness and diverts our attention from Azza’s or Hoda’s queer subjectivity. Ultimately the hyperqueer body of the stage manager buttresses Azza’s sketchy sexuality, and Azza’s now less queer but still nonnormative body serves the supposedly solid heterosexual relationship between Hoda and Mamdouh. The end of the film, through marriage, removes both Azza and Hoda from the performance space that fostered their queer kinship and allowed for the articulation of queer desires. Thus the homosocial space of dance in
the cabaret is affirmed as oppositional to the heteronormative space of marriage and family. The film contains its queer ends but witnesses their possibility all the same.

Queer containment in Habibi is much more violent and final than the previous film. In Habibi Zakia is a central figure in the narrative; she is the pivot point on two love triangles, between Samra and Ahmed, on the one hand, and Samra and Rostom, on the other. Zakia is repeatedly marked as a disruptive figure through her associations with Samra and Ahmed. When she is attempting to convince Samra to sneak out with her, Zakia suggests that dance will bring more into Samra's life: more fun, more worldliness, more money! Her framing of dance reflects the antinormative qualities of Zakia's own life: her independence as the independence of women from fathers and fiancés; her self-sufficiency and the agency of women earning their own keep; her scorn for a heteronormative story and insistence that there is more to life than men in the old neighborhood. Perhaps Zakia's insistence on pleasure and taking it where one can makes her the most nonnormative figure in the film.

With Ahmed, Zakia articulates antinormative values about love and family and is subsequently punished for those views and concordant behaviors. In a conversation with Ahmed after Samra has left him, Zakia suggests: “The thing you’re looking for? It doesn’t exist. Loyalty is just words.” When Ahmed responds, “So there isn’t anything called love?” Zakia makes a pass at him: “Exactly… there is something in the world called ‘passing time.’ I, for example, am dying for you.” She prefers passion and honesty to love and loyalty. Zakia's comments are easily interpreted as nonnormative within the prevailing generic standards for dramas, comedies, and romances, all of which intersect in this film. That Zakia does not believe in love, that she believes only in making the most of the moment, stands not just outside the formulas prescribed by the film industry in its narratives but also outside heteronormative attitudes about love in the mid-twentieth century. Certainly, the attitude she has cultivated threatens monogamous, heterosexual marriage; her lack of belief in loyalty makes her betrayal of Samra (by hitting on her ex-fiancé) logical if not acceptable. It is this attitude of pleasure seeking that makes Zakia so dangerous to those around her: she threatens many of the foundations on which their social order relies. She advocates Samra’s independence, she flirts with Samra and her fiancé, and she chooses thrills and money over love and loyalty.

For a while it seems that Zakia’s viewpoint is correct: she has a Mr. Right Now in Ahmed; she has the money the club provides her; she has her lavish life and style. But like all good thrill seekers, she meets a bad end: for a heteronormative narrative to triumph, Zakia’s unruly desires get disciplined. Saving Ahmed from gunfire, she dies apologizing for her advice to Samra and Ahmed, indicating that the choices she has advocated are immoral. What dies with her is precisely the antinormative, agential vision of women’s lives that she embodied. Her death is the correction and punishment for her errors and the means by which the heteronormative plot can
reemerge. For Zakia, it is too late to be saved. Her lesson is passed on to Ahmed and Samra, who return to their pure, marriage-driven, and loyal love in the wake of her death. Like those of the stage manager in Sigara, Zakia’s nonnormativity and moral failures make Samra and Ahmed recoverable. Like that of Azza, her queer potential is quieted through a common narrative trope. It is only in her complete abjection, like the stage manager’s, that the correct couple can survive.

Both stories secure gendered and sexual normativity through the characters who disrupted that normativity in the original moment; this disruption and its solution avails the viewer of nonnormative performances of gender and desire that are active in the dominant narrative and that exist alongside normative ones. Both resurrect and contain queer potential. Both invoke homoeroticism between women, often located within the space of dance and performance. In these ways both films evidence and recover a rich and multifaceted dialogue about desire, gender, and sexuality in Golden Era Egyptian film.

Conclusion
Queering Golden Era film asserts the presence of nonnormative gender and desire in mainstream Arab texts, resists the erasure of queer subjects from Arab histories, and signals that queerness is neither absent from nor foreign to Arab culture. This article contributes to scholarship on queerness in Arab culture by focusing on women and femininity over men and masculinity. My analysis demonstrates how dance fostered homosociality and homoerotic desire between women, how women’s intimacy with one another challenged heterosexually driven intimacy, and how the rupture of that same intimacy and eroticism onscreen required a narrative resolution that guarded against leaving the film with an “untoward” message. The very regulation of queerness and nonnormativity in the film intimates how prevalent concerns around desire and sexuality were in the Golden Era, and via the Golden Era, in the larger Egyptian and Arab cultural scheme. The films reveal a more diverse gender and sexual dialogue in transnational Arab production than Orientalism and anti-Arab racism deem possible.

The films provide us with a rich collection of images and lessons about gender and sexuality within the context of dance. Dance performance both in real time and in film give way to homoerotic exchanges between women. In the films queer desire takes up as much space as, if not more space than, nonqueer desire. While heterosexuality is ultimately restored in the conclusion of the stories, the presence of nonnormative bodies and desires makes space in the culture of the film and the culture of the viewer for alternate geographies of kinship, coupling, and intimacy to assert themselves.

We see in these films, and others from the period, a history of desire that has morphed and grown more rich alongside the social political climate and that thus has felt its regulations and restrictions severely. The centrality of the Golden Era and
its continued significance to a transnational audience offer space for queer identification with and queer spectatorship of the Arab canon. This is significant insofar as it substantiates the production of and access to a queer history within dominant Arab cultural forms, and it resists the notion that those forms or cultures were forbidding to or absent of queer content. In short, it recovers queer potential within Arab cultural productions and produces an archive for queer Arab subjects.

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