



Peril, privilege, and queer comforts: The nocturnal performative geographies of expatriate gay men in Dubai

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the intersection of expatriate experiences, queer men's lives, and nocturnal geographies within the transnational Middle Eastern setting of Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE). Although narrowly focused on cisgender men who self-identify as “Western” and “gay,” the study addresses a lack of research about LGBT+ presence among expatriates globally, and poor coverage of queer residents in Gulf cities generally. Using ethnography and in-depth interviews among this segment of men who have come to Dubai to work in relatively privileged professional roles for at least two years, we illuminate the shifting, performative geographies of queer belonging in which these men engage to distinguish spaces that can be embodied in different moments with degrees of comfort and caution. Despite their imperiled position in an officially homophobic territory, these men use their various privileges (economic, social, cultural, and sometimes phenotypic) to counter peril in performing transnational identities that reaffirm their own senses of self (as gay), forge new collectivities (as Western), and distinguish themselves from others deemed suspect (potentially anyone “non-Western”). Findings point to the uneasy dynamics of inclusion/exclusion in this kind of unfixated gay nightlife geography, and the need to study queer expatriates in other world settings, as well as queer lives in Gulf cities more broadly, from a further intersectional perspective: beyond nocturnal geographies, and encompassing the range of queer denizens, not just this relatively privileged subset.

1. Introduction

How can a sense of belonging be forged in a setting where one's existence is forbidden? What kind of meaningful places can be made within such spaces where one figures as always out-of-place? Such quandaries have vexed non-heterosexual people for so long, and across so many sites, that they are routine, even banal (Davies et al, 2018; McGlynn et al, 2020; Orne, 2013). However, the compounded marginality of being both queer and foreign can constitute a particularly perilous situation (e.g., Bhagat, 2018; Carrillo, 2019), especially within authoritarian environments that closely police personal behavior, forbid any manifestation of homosexuality, and maintain their right to

imprison or deport migrants for violation of strict norms. Such is the everyday world of queer people who have come from different countries to advance their personal economic trajectories by working in Dubai and other hubs of the Arabian Peninsula – the region with the greatest concentration of foreign-resident workers in the world (Khalaf and Gagnon, 2014). While the urban, geopolitical context of migration in the UAE has received extensive, critical attention (Ali, 2010; Elsheshtawy, 2009, 2020; Kanna, 2011; Kathiravelu, 2016; Le Renard, 2019; Vora, 2013; Walsh, 2018), the population of queer foreign residents is mostly overlooked in scholarship on Gulf cities, and expatriate networks more globally.¹ Moreover, there has been virtually no academic attention to the contemporary situation of local (i.e., non-migrant) LGBT+² people

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¹ The sole exception of work broaching non-heterosexual foreign residents in any Gulf city is Mahdavi's (2019, 2020) highlighting of queer migrations from other parts of the Middle East to Dubai's relatively more anonymous setting. Elsewhere, the scant scholarship focusing on any kind of LGBT+ expatriates include just Collins's (2009) research on gay migrants remaking a neighborhood in Manila, and Hibbins's (2005) study of Chinese male expatriates of multiple sexualities in Australia.

² We use both “LGBT+” (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and more) and “queer” as encompassing terms to refer broadly to people or places that do not identify with heterosexuality uniquely.

in the Gulf either. While we cannot empirically address the broader diversity of queer identities and experiences in the UAE, our research is a crucial beginning effort toward writing LGBT+ geographies in the Gulf region. This article contributes furthermore to the literature on LGBT+ migrants.

Significant geographic research examines queer migration as part and parcel of gay people's life cycle in the sense of moving on in order to reach some kind of sexual liberation and self-realization – migrating from more suffocating to laxer settings (Gorman-Murray, 2007b; Lewis, 2014; Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2011; Weston, 1995). Yet this article focuses on a case where gay expatriates choose to reside in a place with, for most of them, relatively retrograde and draconian official sexual norms, particularly with regards to homosexuality,³ even though it is known for being somewhat *laissez-faire*, socially, compared to enforcement of conservative laws in other Gulf hubs (Kanna, 2010).⁴ Nonetheless, this gay migration to the UAE is not a case of total sexual self-sacrifice or desolation, as our research shows. We focus on a limited, notably privileged, subset of the LGBT+ foreign population in Dubai: gay-identified, cisgender men living and working in the UAE, who are citizens of countries in Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes, which they label encompassingly with the shorthand “Western.”⁵ We illuminate how these men performatively craft transnational spaces of gay belonging in Dubai's nocturnal geography despite official homophobia (see legal context in Section 3). They engage with Dubayyan nightlife to affirm a sense of self as homosexual and cosmopolitan even while often hiding their sexuality in varied ways. Although clearly grappling with peril, these men also enjoy forms of privilege based on national origins and relatively high (albeit quite varied) incomes, which they leverage to cultivate both social and spatial distinctions. Their practices create circumscribed feelings of welcome, familiarity, and comfort while also developing a sense of shared circumstances across ages, professions, and nationalities – within limits, as “Western gay expatriates.”

Drawing on Butler's (1990, 1993, 2004) notion of performativity as enactments that shape subjects, we focus less on identities per se, and more on their practices shaping performative geographies. These are lively, dynamic configurations of space “produced through the citation in performance of particular subject positions [such that] this space, is citational, and itself iterative, unstable, performative” (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 447; see also Boeckler et al, 2014). These geographies are “continually (re)created” (Browne, 2004) through embodied practices,

³ Of course, many examples show pro-LGBT+ laws do not obviate anti-LGBT+ jeopardy: from Brazil, with favorable legal conditions but widespread lethal violence against queer and especially trans Brazilians (e.g., Jung Thapa and Zelayandia, 2016; Rosenberg, 2009), to EU protections that do not translate to everyday civility toward LGBT+ people, evidenced by mistreatments of queer migrants seeking officially queer-friendlier destinations than their countries of origin (Mole, 2021). Nonetheless, antagonistic laws – such as those in the UAE (see details in Section 3) – plainly undermine LGBT+ people, actively foreclosing possibilities for them that are available to heterosexuals.

⁴ To be clear, we are not characterizing the UAE as what Weber (2016) has identified in international relations discourse as a “pathological” anti-gay state. Nonetheless, it is a plain fact that homophobia is enshrined in Emirati law (see Section 3), a situation that – despite instances of everyday tolerance – discounts queer people's lives, limits their personal and professional horizons, and imposes differential encumbrances on LGBT+ people (regardless of intersectional differences) than on heterosexual citizens and residents in the UAE. Our contribution shows how a subset of LGBT+ Dubayyan denizens grapple with this situation through particular performative geographies, rather than simply effacing themselves as stipulated by law, but also without taking on the formidable challenge of addressing legal change in an authoritarian setting.

⁵ Expatriates and many other Dubai residents use “Western” to refer mostly to nationals of Europe, the Americas, and the Antipodes. Encompassing internal racial and other diversities, this term connotes broadly shared cultural and political norms, developmental standards, and predominant Christianity. The term was used while acknowledging (and in many cases openly decrying) formative histories of conquest rooted in European colonialism.

enactments of the accumulated “durable, transposable dispositions” that Bourdieu (1990: 53) calls habitus. Despite their differences, Butler (1999; see also Holt, 2008: 236–240) outlines the performative nature of habitus, which informs how one wields different “forms of capital” – economic, social, cultural, symbolic (Bourdieu, 1986) – within a given field, or set of objective constraints and power configurations. Understanding performative geographies, then, requires appreciating the power-laden context in which they unfold, and how their participants move through and find ways to interact with the structures that constrain them.

Methodologically, for Nash (2000: 657), “the challenge is not to chart [performative geography] but to find ways of writing about its unchartability...to lose ‘oneself’ in the motion, to find a realm unmediated by thought and the burdens of consciousness and individualism – to dance yourself dizzy.” As two queer researchers ourselves, based in Europe at the time of research but originally from two different countries in the Americas, our task was to see through the kind of stupor alluded to by Nash, while also taking part in its transnational, localized performance: we were able to enter the worlds of relatively privileged Western gay expatriates and conduct what was partially a queer autoethnography (Gorman-Murray, 2007a; Holman Jones and Adams, 2016) in pursuit of “unchartable” geographies. Training our focus on performativity and space, we discern the highly context-dependent, sensorially rich embodiments enacted by transnationally mobile, foreign gay residents in Dubai. This article is an account of their performative geographies, where fixed, physical emplacements of queerness – e.g., permanent LGBT+ establishments or “gayborhoods” – are impossible.

Importantly, although Westernness equates neither to Whiteness nor to elite wealth (see fuller details in “Fieldwork” section), the performative geographies of comfort these men enact in Dubai are also clearly geographies of exclusion, delineating ostensible gay safety while occluding “others” deemed suspect – including, typically, fellow queers across geopolitical divides in the city (i.e., “non-Westerners”). We make sense of this dynamic with Ahmed's (2006, 2014) lenses on practice and embodiment, which resonates with Bourdieu and Butler, but shines specific light on feeling, Whiteness, and queerness.

Ahmed (2014: 62–80) shows how the cultural politics of fear operates on different kinds of bodies differently. The quest for comfort enables some bodies to move more freely, to take up more space, never to be held up or scrutinized – in contrast to other bodies marked as threats, experienced as discomfiting, such that efforts to create White comfort are racialized actions to expel discomfort (Ahmed, 2006: 137–142). As with much of her scholarship, Ahmed treats Whiteness phenomenologically, drawing on Said (1978) to consider how imagined others enable subjects to construe their own identities as familiar and comfortable: “a ‘we’ emerges as an effect of a shared direction toward an object” (Ahmed, 2006: 117), which is some version of an “Orient,” providing collective orientation. Ahmed further highlights the phenomenology of queer feelings as living lives at odds with prevailing norms. Resonant with Butler (2004), Ahmed (2006, 2016, 2019) is interested in how people make queer lives livable, forging configurations of affect and meaning in order to find comfort despite out-of-placeness. She emphasizes, however, that not all “queers always feel comfortable in queer spaces” (Ahmed, 2014: 151), so we must understand differentiated accessibility to queer comfort. Moreover, to queer use – for example, to enact performative geographies of gayness in an officially homophobic territory, to repurpose heterosexist spaces as usefully gay, however temporarily or surreptitiously – can be vital, “a matter of survival, becoming fainter as your best chance of being at all,” but it is also always an incomplete project, one that can create new exclusions to overcome even as uses are queered for the benefit of some (Ahmed, 2019: 218, 221–223).

Rather than conjure Western gayness as a “global” set of uniform identities or values among non-heterosexuals, against a speciously stylized foil of local Arab repression, we are interested in understanding

how these expatriate men craft comforts through repertoires of cues, quotes, humor, and defense mechanisms – shown to be responsive to an identifiably transnational homophobia (see Halperin, 2012; Holmes et al, 2017; Oswin, 2015) – as variable versions of a gay habitus put into action within the “super-diverse” (Vertovec, 2007) Dubayyan context. While not homogeneously White, gay expatriates assimilate a White-like privilege from their Western-rooted habits and points of reference to perform gay geographies that act on senses of fear informed by local divisions. In relation to Ahmed’s insights, then, they are both marking queer spaces of comfort and directing their Westernness-as-Whiteness within a setting where reifications of geopolitics, race, and civilization are rampant – among denizens’ perceptions of self and others, but also in official discourses (Kanna et al, 2020; Le Renard, 2019). We show three performative geographies they enact: typical nights out, an atypical night out, and typical nights in, each fostering particular comforts by restricting who can enjoy them. These *queer comforts of occlusion* are spatialized enactments of gayness and Westernness that block those who cannot or refuse to negotiate belonging among this circumscribed set of dispositions and practices. Specifying rather than naturalizing the obstacles they emplace offers a critical perspective on what prevents – and thus what might be overcome in favor of – forging more transversal forms of queer affiliations (e.g., Al-Qasimi, 2020) in the transnational Gulf today.

2. Expatriate geographies & livable queer lives

Dubai, like several rapidly growing Gulf cities (Molotch and Ponzini, 2019), has a massive foreign-resident population, at more than 92% of residents (Dubai Statistics Center, 2019). This requires any analysis of the city to consider not just citizens, but all the emirate’s urban denizens. Beyond valuable scholarship on the majority of foreign denizens who are undervalued, exploited labor migrants in Gulf cities (Buckley, 2013; Kamrava and Babar, 2012; Kathiravelu, 2016), growing research explores more privileged foreign-resident Dubayyan experiences (Le Renard, 2019; Vora, 2013; Walsh, 2018), with expatriates buttressing sectors from airlines to banks to universities (Ewers, 2013). Although a smaller cohort, some 500,000 UAE residents hail from Europe, the Americas, southern Africa, and the Antipodes, estimated to fit the broad profile of expatriate professionals (BQDoha, 2015). “Expatriate” – an unofficial, socially charged category – typically refers to foreign-born residents who are especially skilled or high-earning, often with a racialized, classed, and geopolitical connotation contrasting to “labor migrant” (Kunz, 2016: 90–97), a relational distinction readily apparent in the transnational migration hubs dotting the Gulf littoral (Jamal, 2015).

While very little work delves into the lives of queer expatriates, anywhere in the world,⁶ diverse studies of heterosexual – or sexually unspecified – expatriates explore how relatively privileged migrants forge community and navigate residence and work abroad (Bork-Hüffer and Yeoh, 2017; Pow, 2011; Wiles, 2008), while negotiating difference in their non-native settings (Kunz, 2018; Nagel, 2005; Simic, 2019), sometimes analyzed as “flexible citizens” (Ong, 1999), including in Dubai specifically (Kanna, 2010). Expatriate or not, queer denizens of Gulf cities are nearly absent from the academic literature. In a footnote, Walsh (2007: 528–529) notes the presence of LGBT+ Britons in Dubai as largely invisibilized and unresearched, while Le Renard (2019: 203), in her study concentrating on Dubai’s French heterosexual residents, makes brief mention of gay male flight attendants as a sizeable subgroup among all expatriates in the emirate.

Despite the plain fact that queer people exist everywhere, there are

⁶ Only the human-resources literature grapples extensively with LGBT+ expatriates – documenting the disproportionate limitations and jeopardies they face (e.g., McNulty and Hutchings, 2016; McPhail and McNulty, 2015; Paisley and Tayar, 2016).

no studies in any discipline that take an empirical focus on queer lives or spaces in Dubai or its neighboring metropolises. In contrast, historical surveys boldly claim European and American cities as “the social world proper of the homosexual, his [sic] life space” (Bech, 1997: 98) and “a magnet for homosexuals” (Aldrich, 2004: 1720) due to the anonymity offered by metropolitan hubbub for long-stigmatized homosexual connections. Brown (2000) conceptualizes “closet space” to discern how queer people interact with various global-North urban geographies in often contradictory ways: sometimes metaphorical, sometimes material, “the closet” indicates a kind of invisibilization of queer life that can be deeply oppressive – as the inability to be openly queer – even while paradoxically providing a kind of refuge, a hidden space to be queer without heteronormative reproach. Among examples of closet spaces are LGBT+ bars and districts, which may be marked explicitly as homosexual, but can act as closets by delimiting acceptable, circumscribed geographies for LGBT+ people. Indeed, extensive scholarship centers “gayborhoods” as pivotal in comprehending queer urban geographies (e.g., Brown-Saracino, 2018; Conner and Okamura, 2021; Ghaziani, 2014, 2021; Greene, 2014; Lewis, 2013; Orne, 2017; Visser, 2013), but also broader queer nocturnal geographies (e.g., Cattani and Vanolo, 2014; Stillwagon and Ghaziani, 2019; van Liempt et al., 2015), consistently highlighting nightlife in shaping senses of LGBT+ urban belonging. Yet growing critical research shows how unaccepting queer nightlife spaces can be in terms of race, class, and other intersectional inequalities.

The post-apartheid context in South Africa has yielded important interventions examining the intense Whiteness of many ostensibly inclusive gay nightlife venues (Oswin, 2005, 2007; Tucker, 2009; Visser, 2003, 2008), and the development of pro-Black and other alternative LGBT+ spaces in response to these exclusions (Davids and Matebeni, 2017; Livermon, 2014; Tucker, 2011). More than portraying how Black queer spaces in Soweto are distinct from White-majority gay nightlife elsewhere in South Africa, Livermon (2014) reveals the crucial insights of performativity in the intricate choreography through which these settings materialize:

[P]rovisional spaces formed through the practices [of black queers] point to the possibilities of creating a more socially accountable post-apartheid South Africa ... Performance, particularly the kinds of performances associated with leisure space, ... is a key site for determining how black queer South Africans use space in order to create livable lives. (Livermon, 2014: 519)

Moreover, Livermon co-performs Black queerness, and thus co-constitutes these spaces, with his research participants, gaining insight on their shifting geographies, and the new social worlds they foster. Although our own research focuses on relatively privileged gay men, a key lesson from Livermon still accrues: by studying queer urban geographies as they are performed, we can grasp what kinds of lives they prize, and how this matters in shaping their spatialities.

Although the great bulk of studies on urban homosexuality skews coverage toward the global North (Brown et al, 2010; Dworkin et al, 2016), Tucker and Hassan (2020) identify significant opportunities for research to understand better the nature of manifold queer lives by bringing more critical scholarship on sexualities into our geographies of the urban Global South. Research on non-normative sexualities in the Middle East is certainly not absent (see Khalaf and Gagnon, 2014; Whitaker, 2006), yet a wealth of historical, literary, theological, legal, and political-theoretical scholarship contrasts with a paucity on contemporary queer urban lives across the region, and none whatsoever that brings an empirical lens to non-heterosexual people in the Gulf’s glittering spectacles of development.

Where we do find ethnographically sophisticated scholarship on queer urban lives in the Middle East is the ethnically heterogeneous, geopolitically volatile setting of Beirut. Quite unlike Dubai, there are prominent if contested discourses that position the Lebanese capital as a gay haven in the Arab world – a claim which Merabet (2014b: 522) and

Moussawi (2013, 2020: 19-22) critically dissect in their work on queer Lebanese identities, conditions, and performances. Merabet (2014a: 21-22) analyzes “how queer-identified individuals in Lebanon formulate and negotiate the craft of a bodily performance, the morality of which is established by interacting with an all-too-often hostile world,” while Moussawi (2020: 55-75) shows spatialized senses of desirability, safety, and indeed “civilization” across a differentiated queer field in Beirut. Digging deep into intersectional questions of “comfort” in this context, Moussawi (2020: 159) shows how some bodies – due to physical appearances, but also their accumulated experiences and advantages/disadvantages – are able to fit more easily in some LGBT+ Beirut spaces than others. This resonates with Livermon’s work on alternative geographies of queer performativity, but also with Ahmed’s insights on embodiment, queer feelings, and exclusion.

In our Dubai research, we consider imaginations and practices related to what Moussawi and Merabet identify, but with a few key shifts: by studying a context where, unlike Beirut, non-citizens constitute the majority of urban denizens, we examine the specificities of how expatriates shape their version of queer comforts, and train our lens on these gay men’s quotidian performative geographies within the spectacular development of the Gulf.

3. LGBT+ marginalization in the transnational Gulf

From the beginnings of UAE oil development in the 1960s, Dubai fueled plans to become a central economic hub of the Middle East (Elessawy, 2017: 35), crafting business-friendly policies and an image of exceptional openness with limited cultural tolerance (Kanna, 2011: 34-35). Dubai became a desirable destination for migrants from all over the world seeking economic opportunities, experiencing soaring growth: while the Emirati citizen population grew fivefold since 1975, Dubai’s non-citizen population expanded 23 times over, representing 92.1% of the emirate’s 3,355,900 denizens by 2019 (Elessawy, 2017; Dubai Statistics Center, 2019).

Nationality-aligned segmentation between low- and high-skilled migrant sources creates an economic and social stratification of Dubayyan denizens into three groups: at the top are the local Emiratis, followed by other Arabs and Westerners working in “advanced” sectors, and then manual laborers and caretakers coming especially from South Asia and the Philippines (Jamal, 2015). Sharp differences divide these groups in terms of residential location, modal transport options, and presence in consumer sites throughout the city, implicitly conferring a graduated sense of worth and “citizenship” (Vora and Koch, 2015). European-ancestry foreigners in Dubai tend to enjoy far more ease of mobility and less discrimination, regardless of salary and education (Walsh, 2018: 45-47); Westerners of color, Le Renard (2019: 109-140) finds, experience complex positioning in this racialized hierarchy but tend to be recognized as “expatriates” due to embodied cultural capital aligning with their passports.

Across all these denizen categories, any kind of sexual activity outside of heterosexual marriage is strictly illegal. The UAE’s Federal Penal Code technically allows the death penalty as possible punishment for homosexual acts – one of 11 such countries. Article 356 of Federal Law No. 3 (1987) classifies homosexual intimacy as a “crime of voluntary debasement,” with a possible jail penalty of 15 years (ILGA, 2019: 52). Furthermore, the emirate’s Penal Code also allows imprisonment up to ten years under Article 177, classifying homosexuality as a crime of sodomy (HRW, 2018). One could thus be charged under either federal or local laws for same-sex intimacy of any kind. There are no published statistics about the UAE’s enforcement of such laws, nor publicly available records of police actions specifically related to homosexuality. However, for decades international media have spotlighted Dubai’s treatment of queer people – especially foreigners, although these are certainly not the only people affected: examples range from shutting down a discotheque due to its “gay night” and cross-dressing DJ (Gardner, 2001), to imprisoning a Belgian man for having consensual

homosexual intercourse (Za’za’, 2012), to detaining two Brazilian transgender women at Dubai airport for “imitating” females (Molloy, 2014). Although there are current state-led initiatives to “modernize” Emirati family law (Polymenopoulou, 2020; Qiblawi, 2020), such reforms do not envisage any change to the illegal status of all homosexual relations.

Emirati laws moreover bar freedom of expression related to sexual orientation in general, and prohibit LGBT+ civil-society organizations (ILGA, 2019: 52). The UAE’s Telecommunications and Regulatory Authority blocks all websites and mobile applications that “promote destructive principles such as homosexuality” (UAETRA, 2020). Using gay-focused geosocial dating applications, such as Grindr, requires virtual private networks (VPNs) – which are also illegal – that digitally circumvent location-specific embargoes. Highlighting these official stances and the potential peril faced by all LGBT+ people in Dubai, one of the most popular dating apps for all sexualities – Tinder – superimposes cautionary messaging when users log in from the UAE as seeking someone of their same sex (see Fig. 1). Many gay-specific apps show similar warnings.

Immersed in this rhetoric, and whispers of potential threats, gay men – and many others – face an environment that appears unwelcoming, indeed menacing, on the surface. For those who have come from countries with LGBT+ protections, and cities with varied scenes catering to queer leisure-seekers, there is no straightforward manner of replicating the ways of life they have developed elsewhere. Yet gay expatriate men in Dubai clearly cultivate transnational, performative geographies of gay life in the city. Our field research delved into how and where these would take shape.

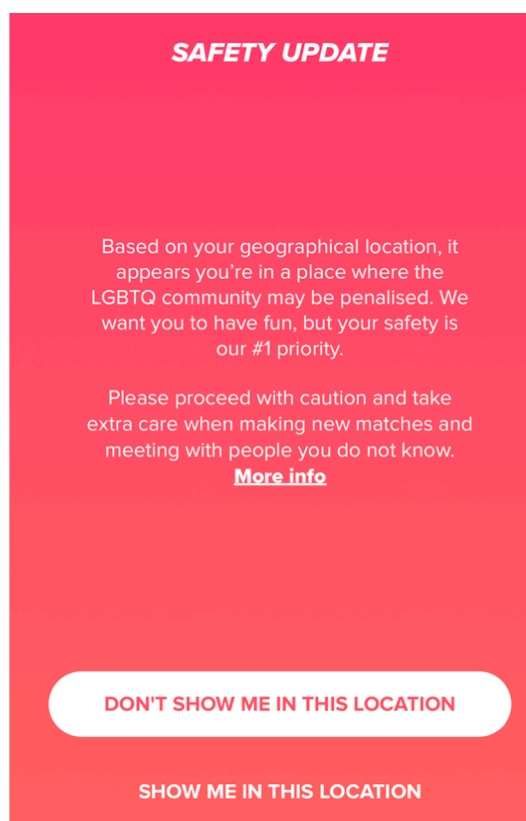


Fig. 1. Warning for LGBT+ users of dating app when in the UAE, or anywhere homosexuality is criminalized.

Source: Screenshot from Tinder, July 2019. Trademarked material, used with permission.

4. Fieldwork

This article draws on fieldwork carried out in Dubai during a six-year period, including continuous residence over four months in mid-2019, to analyze outings in privately-owned nighttime establishments (bars and nightclubs) and private home-spaces. The illegal status of homosexuality in the UAE poses significant challenges to conducting research with a formally stigmatized group, “who by definition constitute a hidden population, where secrecy is often the norm” (Hobbs, 2007: 215). The field, nevertheless, was familiar to us. One of the authors was visiting Dubai quarterly since 2013, when family first settled in the city; the other supervised research about and conducted briefer fieldwork within Gulf cities since 2014, including contact with queer expatriate networks as part of other research projects. Regardless of each stay’s duration in Dubai, we were immersed in the gay social networks and expatriate spaces under focus here.

This familiarity, and our lived experiences as co-participants in creating gay spaces, positioned us as “privileged observers” (Hersker and Leap, 1996: 144), able to engage “extensively in happenstance settings where opportunities for research might not otherwise be available to [non-gay-identified] ethnographers.” Although we were never in the field at the same time as each other, our “team ethnography” (O’Reilly, 2009) approach involved a shared research focus, mutually constitutive feedback, and collaborative writing. Research began with participant-observation in eight nightlife venues in Dubai where men who have sex with men often meet. Firsthand experience allowed an embodied form of learning through the field via emotions and reactions (Altork, 2003), from which we gleaned a visceral sense of the spaces frequented by expatriate gay men.

We also conducted semi-structured interviews, relying on seven personal contacts to find 26 interviewees,⁷ selected through referral methods ideal for researching stigmatized populations (Penrod et al, 2003). Our interlocutors were all cisgender men, self-identified as gay, aged 24–48. Most were single, and attended university in North America or Europe, with varied occupations from airline hospitality to financial management, leading to enormous annual-income differences across these men: e.g., bankers earned roughly 15 times more, yearly, than cabin crew. While no interviewee expressed strong religious beliefs, most identified as non-practicing Catholics and Protestants; one participant self-identified as Muslim, and another as Jewish. Representing 15 nationalities (see Appendix A), all immigrated to Dubai from prior residence in Europe or the Americas.

A simple majority of participants – just over half – could be categorized as “White,” in that they openly identified as such and would be commonly considered European, in terms of ancestry, almost anywhere in the world. However, with these men hailing from such an array of national contexts, their local terminologies and frames of race vary significantly, frequently not transposing straightforwardly to other countries’ classifications (DaCosta, 2020). Furthermore, there were several Westerners of color (although this self-designation differs tremendously by context), particularly among our disproportionately large sample of Iberian and Latin American men, who experienced

⁷ We screened for foreign men, identified as non-heterosexual, with 2-year minimum residence in Dubai, who could comment on gay nightlife venues. Interviews were in English, Spanish, or Portuguese, lasting 90–150 minutes. Five interlocutors preferred private settings rather than the cafés where most interviews took place. After general questions about their lives in Dubai, we invited interviewees to reflect on experiences related to their sexuality and the different social and physical dimensions of spaces they frequent in Dubai. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and labelled with pseudonyms for identity protection (see Appendix A).

ambiguous racialization in the UAE and whose native-country racial categories do not correspond to classifications abroad (see Loveman, 2014; Wade, 2010). Several *mestizo*⁸ men were frequently mistaken as Arab, including by Arabs, based on phenotypic traits; another of our Western-identified interviewees who comes from a family of South Asian, Muslim background, also experienced racial equivocation in the UAE. These participants – nearly one-third of interviewees – described having “a foot in two worlds” throughout their Dubayyan experiences: they could vividly understand Western privilege because they also knew firsthand what it meant to be treated as a non-European “other” – as well as the benefits this non-White status could confer, such as the ability to pass unnoticed in certain settings – yet they were able to move in between these worlds through recourse to Western forms of capital (their “Western” salaries, friends, and languages/culture). Most participants of color described experiencing greater inclusion as amorphously “Western” in the expatriate context than in majority-White national settings. This was not always seamless, however, whether because people (be they Emiratis, fellow expatriates, or others) sometimes refused to recognize them as Western due to phenotype, or due to tensions they felt themselves in terms of split allegiances across religious or racial divides.

Our own mixed racial-ethnic positionings as researchers reflected some of these variations across participants. One author is a multiracial US citizen who generally benefits from White privilege by appearance. The other author is a Brazilian citizen with multiple European, African, and Indigenous ancestries, who identifies as *pardo* – one of several mixed-race labels in his native Brazil (Telles, 2004), connoting medium skin tone between imagined extremes of White and Black (Silva and Leão, 2012) – a socially imbued descriptor that does not translate easily into understood racial formations elsewhere; in most of the world, including the UAE, he is seldom categorized by others as White. These biographies and our polyglot repertoires facilitated interview access and inclusion in social gatherings as part of an identifiably, albeit diverse, “Western” social group in Dubai. Being in similar intersectional circumstances to men in this study sensitized us to how our participants’ sexuality was officially vilified; we took great care to render identities undetectable, hewing to norms of research previously conducted on non-homosexual but similarly illegal activities in the UAE (Walsh, 2018: 59–61).

5. Invisible in plain sight: Communities of strategic deception

In the course of our research, we documented eight bars and clubs frequented by expatriate gay men in Dubai. Although spatially dispersed, all are located in the districts of Marina, Jumeirah, Downtown, and Internet City – also home to most of the middle-class or wealthier foreign population in the emirate. Seven of these venues share broad similarities in patron demographics, aesthetic styles, and average costs. We depict these as comprising a typical expatriate gay night out in Dubai, where Western men who have sex with other men are socializing in plain sight, yet perform strategic self-invisibilizations.

Much of Dubayyan gay nightlife takes place in venues within the city’s copious international hotels, which are technically open to all who can afford them. These palatial, shimmering structures are havens from the extreme heat, even hours after sundown. Patrons arrive mostly by taxi, creating traffic jams up to the hotel drop-off as they opt to spend 10 more minutes in the air-conditioned car over walking from the street in roasting temperatures. Once inside the hotel, at the bar doorway, there are inevitably two different lines, managed by a smartly dressed host who communicates with staff via headset as she – always a woman, often blonde, uniformly European-descent – keeps order outside, backed by security guards, usually two impressively tall, muscular African-

⁸ In Spanish-speaking Latin America, “*mestizo*” refers to mixed ancestry, specifically Spanish and Indigenous, but it can vary widely in usage (Telles and Paschel, 2014).

ancestry men. The queues exhibit varied visible ethnic or national backgrounds, and the hum of idle chatter is a blend of different Englishes, including Dubai pidgin (Piller, 2018), and a smattering of French and Arabic. One line is peopled by women in the company of men, whereas the second line comprises only men, some appearing to be solo, others joking with their all-male buddies as they wait. The first line always flows more smoothly, with this mixed-sex cohort typically paying no admission fee; this line is also more White-appearing in its composition. The male-only queue is markedly less European by appearance, with most men possibly from the Middle East, speaking Arabic in varied accents; this queue progresses very slowly, often becoming an amorphous agglomeration jockeying for the host's attention, especially as the wait wears on. Each of these men is required to pay a cover charge (minimum, 50–100.﷮) [Emirati dirhams; ≈US \$14–28] for the privilege of entering. Although the men's line is a robust revenue stream before even buying drinks inside, if the venue is busy, these men will be delayed as lowest priority. But almost no one abandons the wait.

Once inside, gushed along by inward blasts of intense air-conditioning, there is a heady mix of cologne and liquor in the air. Across the dimly lit bar, the visible male-to-female ratio is a drastic shift from outside, nearly 1:1, with what appear to be happy mixed-sex pairings laughing the evening away. Even the most honed sense of gaydar might not detect that the crowd's male contingent includes a sizeable portion interested in other men.⁹ Most have brought a female friend or relative to ensure they are not kept waiting at the door. In addition to being largely of European background and wearing recognizably upscale, global brands of clothing, these men share one more characteristic: they seem to be struggling to display heteronormative masculinities, burying traits coded as “feminine” they may otherwise display. But the occasional slip is telling: as libations flow, hips sway more, sassy comments ramp up, and eyes wander.

When queer shibboleths manifest, there is often an effort to rein in their expression. As one example among many: a dark-haired man in his twenties, shifting back and forth between Italian and English, is circled by three women and one other man as he sits perched past the opulent bar. His shoulders are broad, his biceps sculpt the sleeves of his white La Martina button-down shirt, and he is throwing back single-malt whiskey as if it were water. Suddenly he swivels out of his seat to the floor and forcefully thrusts his hands onto his hips, then raises one finger to waggle at his friends in a faux-admonishing move before he about-faces to sashay to the bartender. His three female companions erupt into laughter, inciting others around them to smirk and look towards the quartet. The one male friend smiles but rolls his eyes and leans in to whisper in one of the women's ear. While still trying to tame her guffaws, she swings into action and reaches out to the drunken man's elbow, catching up to him before he arrives at the bar, and whispering to him in turn. Suddenly, his posture straightens and he gestures a soldier-like salute to her, then offers her the crook of his arm as they stride up to the bar together, making her break down in laughter all over again.

The music played here might be a kind of upbeat jazz or lounge music, giving little indication of era or location; popular, internationally charting tunes are also played, but rarely the kind of remixed, beat-heavy tracks or classically “gay” songs that dominate in self-proclaimed LGBT+ bars with varied styles across most global cities. There are many cover versions of famous older songs; a favorite seems to be female *bossa nova* renditions of the Beatles. The physical crafting of

the space is also rather generic, reflecting an international 5-star hotel bar style that somehow straddles staid and sumptuous with a transnational regularity these mostly expatriate attendees have come to recognize in countless metropolises. Despite such familiarity, none of these features matches the mainstream gay clubs that would have likely been known to this audience in their home countries. There is no taking off of shirts, no thumping music, no grinding on the dancefloor – often there is no dancefloor, really – and no swirl of pulsating lights or boisterous performances to Beyoncé or other icons of the gay world. But occasionally, the DJ will suddenly play something by Britney Spears, Céline Dion, or Kate Ryan, and the crowd will launch into a spirited singalong, with many men knowing every lyric by heart and clearly moved by these divas into a dramatic if momentary performance before returning to a more reserved demeanor. While the heavy-drinking culture of expatriate communities in Dubai is infamous (Walsh, 2007), at these bars and clubs the men tend to keep their drinking in careful check, attempting to maintain control of their attitudes and expressions.

I always try to keep an eye on how many drinks I have at these parties. Like, when we drink too much and I start feeling like I'm losing it, I just leave and go home. We're always with that fear in the back of our heads of drinking too much and ending up making a wrong move on the wrong person – someone who could end up calling the authorities. [interview with Juan, 2019]

To circulate among these spaces in Dubai, expatriate gay men perform heteronormative masculinities they believe befit a safe, Western “ideal,” and typically expend substantial economic capital to fit in. But the social capital of being plugged into expatriate gay networks matters too. When first encountering these spaces, we wondered how so many men knew this was a party attended by many other gay men. These were indeed “parties” – on a specific night of the week for different sites – frequented by gays, not bars identified as gay overall. Not a single venue's webpage uses the word “gay” or related euphemisms, nor do they hint at targeting a gay crowd. Nearly everyone we met in these venues, and all interviewees, indicated learning about the parties via word-of-mouth or WhatsApp group chats with other expatriates. News of a particular Dubayyan party, or novel event, is spread using private communications only; openly gay parties are illegal, so one depends on social networks to find the coordinates for these typical nights out. As soon as a party appears in a review on TripAdvisor or travelers' blogs identifying it as a recurrent “gay” event in a set location, the party will either change name, or venue, or both, to divert potential intervention by Emirati authorities and shield the party's organizers, staff, and attendees from official efforts to quell open manifestations of homosexuality.

Social capital is also crucial for affordability. For some Western gay men – particularly those in highly-paid finance, consulting, and engineering professions – the cover charge and standard high costs of a Dubai hotel bar are no object. But for airline crew (averaging 110,000.﷮) [≈US\$29,950] annual salary), who make up a large portion of our sample and the city's transnationals, these costs could be prohibitive if recurrent. However, employees of Emirates Airlines carry “FACE” Cards (Flight Attendants Club of Emirates), entitling them to deep discounts at hotels, restaurants, and gyms throughout Dubai – typically 30–50% off. Crew members recounted how they would regularly use their discount to lower costs for gay friends in much higher-earning professions, at these bars and other Dubayyan venues, who would then cover the costs of their flight-attendant friends, literally lubricating these social networks while reducing their own expenses. Moreover, gay flight attendants would typically invite close female colleagues to these outings, enabling them to pair up as a mixed-sex couple to skip the wait as well as the cover charge outside. Of course, any man in any profession could do the same, but cabin crew were the men who most needed to engage in this practice as an economic imperative, and also worked in a more feminized sector than other expatriate men in the city.

⁹ Although an estimation, across the seven venues hosting occasional “gay parties,” five (71%) were dominated by men whose sexual orientation was not obviously queer, or was very ambiguous. In the other two, most men appeared gay based on queer-associated commentary and pop-cultural knowledge, or as identified confidentially by mutual acquaintances, yet still conforming largely to “straight-acting” conduct in the venue: no same-sex contact, and normative masculine dress as standard.

These are the few publicly available spaces where gay men can establish contacts with other gay men, and thus expand their peer networks, in person. Not once did we observe same-sex physical contact in these spaces, not even friendly gestures: there was none of the laddish homosocial conviviality of men drunkenly slouching on their male friends' shoulders while regaling everyone in earshot with exaggerated storytelling – the paradoxical epitome of confident male heterosexuality. Instead, interactions among men were subdued, even if flirtatious, with chatting and coded exchanges of glances. At most, these might result in trading phone numbers while at the venue, allowing men to continue engaging later in private.

Most interlocutors preferred these spaces over gay dating apps to meet people because they found virtual spaces unsafe in Dubai:

When I first moved to the Gulf, I started getting to know other gay guys as friends, mostly through the apps. I learned to change that though – fast. In my second month or so, one of my friends here, another Latin American guy, was suddenly gone. He'd been deported after he was entrapped in a hoax hook-up arranged by the cops. These parties, of course, can have their dangers too. But I definitely feel safety in numbers! They might be able to bust some of us [gays] here and there, but the authorities care about appearances. They don't want to create a scandal by getting aggressive on this kind of scale, especially when it appears more sexually ambiguous. [interview with José, 2016]

These stories circulate among expatriate gay men and instill a sense of generalized caution. Some know a person who was directly affected, others just recount the same elements in script-like fashion. Another prevalent cautionary tale involves “regional” (i.e., non-Emirati) Arab men in Dubai who use gay apps to meet up with Western men, surreptitiously film their intimate encounters, and then extort the non-Arab men. The empirical commonality of such predicaments is unknowable, but the effects of these plotlines do not depend on veracity: they are regularly rehearsed to any new gay arrivals from the West, and cultivate a boundary between trustworthy, in-person contacts and dodgy online spaces, while also figuring most Arab men – straight or gay, Emirati or otherwise – as potentially suspect.

This fright-fueled, geopolitical circumspection at the interpersonal level, even if misplaced, reflects Ahmed's (2014: 70) meditation on how “fear works to align bodily and social space.” In effect, these men from different national origins, with varied careers and very varied incomes, close ranks around a sense of collectivity as gay and – new for many of them – as Western (rather than as French, Chilean, Canadian, Latin American, European, etc.), but able to enact a certain kind of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). They attempt to obscure their homosexuality in order to sustain it. They find comfort by finding each other, reinforcing a sense of commonality as being from elsewhere despite a diversity of passports, and some – albeit less – diversity of appearances. This limits the possibility of inclusion for anyone who does not fit the performative mold, either needing to be controlled or distanced “to contain some [other] bodies such that they take up less space” (Ahmed, 2014: 69), or are given less opportunity to be present in these circles, occluded for the sake of a stylized queer comfort.

This is not the kind of uninhibitedness and experimentation documented by researchers of heterosexual expatriates – in Dubai (Le Renard, 2019; Walsh, 2007, 2018) and elsewhere (Favell, 2011: 169–185) – who often exploit a relative lack of social expectations from “home” around comportment related to dating, sex, and public personae, marking off their experience abroad as a liberating, temporary suspension of norms. These gay men also experience suspended norms, but for most this entails more rather than fewer strictures. On typical gay nights out, these men develop a bodily sense of how to stay relatively safe yet still able to exercise their gayness, if studiously acting as “un-gay” among other Western gay men as they possibly can. Encumbered but resolute, they trade on the privileges they do have – some

combination of economic capital, the embodied cultural capital of a broad “Westernness,” and the social capital of either wealthier or discount-wielding friends, including many heterosexual female companions – in order to play out what they believe is the most appropriate, or least risky, scenario for going out, catching up, and having some hope of meeting other gay men. Unlike the bold subversiveness of a “queer habitus” (Merabet, 2014a: 20–21; 2014b), these gay men collectively perform a deceptively anodyne sexuality to avoid danger – a kind of circumspect, ostensibly “respectable” gay habitus in public. Any signs of flamboyance or brashness tend to be squelched with haste, even if fleetingly enjoyed.

6. The global gays as Allah's guests: Circumscribed exception

In contrast to the circumspection just elaborated, there is the rare exception that proves the rule of how privilege, homosexuality, and transnationality shape gay performative geographies in Dubai. Across the eight venues observed for this research, one was a significant outlier. At this party, held at the open rooftop bar of a Marina district hotel, no woman could be discerned in the entrance line. While queuing to pay the 150د.ا. (≈US\$42) admittance fee, spotlights in the LGBT+ rainbow flag's colors illuminated the faces of mostly European- and Arab-looking men in line. Once inside, the music was throbbing and, immediately, this scene, at least in Dubai, felt viscerally exceptional: everywhere there are men kissing each other, walking hand-in-hand, and cuddling in shadowy corners. Flirtation was open and aggressive here, with none of the subtlety or bashfulness in approaches made at other bars, which would only follow an overture of many exchanged glances. Here, various men directly tapped other men on the shoulder, including the researchers, to offer a range of invitations from dancing together under the flashing lights to leaving right away to go back to their homes.

After finally making it through the clamoring throngs at the bar for a basic cocktail, priced at 100د.ا. (≈US\$27), it seemed there might be a chance to watch these mating rituals unfold. But just then, a group of half-naked male dancers swooshed onto the dancefloor, performing a boisterous version of Lady Gaga's *Born This Way* – her identity-affirming anthem with specific lyrics of gay acceptance: “It doesn't matter if you love him [in reference to a gay man], or capital H-I-M [in a religious reference to God]” (Germanotta and Laursen, 2011). The dancers slid a wooden box into the center of the floor, and midway through the song it burst open to reveal a cross-dressed man with a blonde wig, in what seemed to be an impersonation of some kind of gay “god.”

No matter how tacky and poorly choreographed this Gaga-driven drag performance, it was overwhelming how much of what Emirati officials categorized as deviance and depravity was being enacted at every turn here. Unlike every other gay party we observed in Dubai, this felt more akin to, or even surpassed, the envelope-pushing revelry of gay nightclubs we had experienced from London to São Paulo to Los Angeles. After spending two hours in this venue, it seemed the usual boundaries of Emirati behavioral norms simply did not apply, or at least this was a testing ground for challenges against them, with men – whether Western, Arab, or others – entwining provocatively. Out of the far end of the dancefloor, a member of security personnel came up to a nearby male couple who, unlike many others ostentatiously simulating sex acts as if in sport, were holding each other tenderly, their eyes locked in close proximity. The staff member interceded with a hand on each man's sternum, nudging them apart. Leaning in with one eyebrow raised, he gave them an order: “Leave a bit of space for Allah, guys – don't get too excited.” Security staff seemed to issue warnings like these rather than ever physically repressing gay guests.

It is super common to see [gay] people kissing and engaging in much more explicit behavior at [names party]. And I have seen all types of reactions from the security, from verbal warnings to kicking people out. They say the right thing security should do when they encounter this kind of public display of affection is to call the authorities, but

they do not want to do it because they know that everyone would end up being arrested, including the security personnel themselves. [interview with Matthew, 2019]

This party was not a regular event, but there were similarly extravagant, debauchorous events that would happen irregularly elsewhere in the emirate, from penthouses to nearby desert locations. Such parties were spaces of exception for homosexual expatriate performativities in Dubai that connect to what some have dubbed a “global gay” repertoire (Martel, 2018; Oswin, 2006) of dance music, cultural references, translingual vocabulary, and sexual overtness – elements coalescing in different local formations but constituting a capitalism-fueled template for gay identity. While potentially available to a range of differently positioned people, engagement with this kind of material, in a public setting, can pose significant dangers when not accepted as appropriate or innocuous. Only those with the most cumulative privilege among a generally imperiled population of heterogeneous Dubai-based homosexuals would attempt to deploy this repertoire openly. Indeed it is the highest-earning and most transnationally experienced among gay expatriate men, and to some extent the most extravagantly wealthy of Arab men (Emirati or otherwise), in addition to a contingent of global tourists, who are self-assured enough to engage in this revelry frequently, addressing personnel as if peers, or even inferiors, while flouting local regulations in favor of enactments of gayness more common in the world’s wealthiest countries from which many of these men hail. In the very rare case of one of our participants having a handful of gay Emirati friends, he commanded one of the highest incomes in our sample, and would frequent these raucous celebrations with a mix of European and Arab friends who also partied hard (in terms of high levels of alcohol and drug consumption), wielded large sums of money without hesitation, and – for the Emirati men involved – came from especially privileged backgrounds. Privilege mattered for access, but also for protection:

My closest Emirati mate, this guy [*names friend*], he’s great – so much fun. He’s [a closeted officer within the UAE security and enforcement sector], from this super-wealthy family so he doesn’t even need to work, but he’s all “work hard, play harder.” And on the nights he’s not out with us, he keeps us in the loop about anything we need to know: when he texts me [an agreed code word] then I know the authorities are on their way to shut down the party, so I grab my buddies and just get the fuck out of there! [interview with Keith, 2019]

In a sense these are gay men performing aspects of “flexible citizenship” outlined by Ong (1999) and Kanna (2010), couched within a consumeristic rather than legalistic frame. But this is more specifically a version of transnational “microcitizenship” (Centner 2012: 344–349): logics of belonging from elsewhere are applied in a very specific local setting, under narrowly felicitous terms – in this case, jockeying for a version of “global gay” rights that have nothing to do with laws and everything to do with the performance of privilege, out in the open.

7. At home with out-of-placeness

Western gay men in Dubai can also be adept at crafting homes as havens of private comfort, forge deepened senses of community in perhaps the most occlusive of performative expatriate geographies. Homes represent guarded spheres of homosexuality, and for many the freest stage for performing aspects of gay expatriate identity. Gatherings in these spaces are commonplace, yet take various forms: from parties with free-flowing libations to family-like reunions watching Netflix. In the latter case, the modal choice is an episode of RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, an American TV reality competition featuring drag queens that is, rather incredibly (given widespread sexuality-related censorship), available on Netflix’s UAE catalogue. Whatever their format, these home gatherings are where gay men feel most at liberty to speak and share openly. While

“nights out” discussed above give gay men a chance to expand connections, the home space is often used to augment existing relationships and build a more robust sense of belonging, establishing supportive networks that reinforce their identification as both gay and Western, individually and as a group.

This meeting space is usually an apartment with multiple gay-identifying hosts. It is common for unmarried Western expatriates, depending on occupation and career stage, to obtain single-sex shared accommodation via employer provision in Dubai. Since most companies arrange randomly assign housing in shared flats, it is up to gay men to ask heterosexual flatmates to switch with a gay contact, so two or more gay men can cohabit.

We seem to be able to work it out to get the gays living together [*chortles*]. It seems the straight expat guys are either cool with letting the gays group up because they know this isn’t the easiest place for us and they’re sympathetic, or they’re dicks and basically happy to run away from us as fast and far as possible to team up with other heteros. There are some decent ones though, who tease, “dude, I’ll do this to help you out, but the gays always got their ear to the ground. I want that good party intel, bro!” [interview with Russ, 2017]

This bargaining is also done by gay couples who work at the same company, rather than requesting partnered accommodation overtly, which is illegal. Gay-inhabited apartments become protected spaces for organizing gatherings, where – despite requests for “good party intel” – only the closest of friends are invited.

Such “nights in” usually include gay expatriate friends who met each other either through gay “nights out” in Dubai, professional networks, or connections in their country of origin. When attending gatherings where one of us did not know either the hosts or several attendees, there was usually palpable hesitation around our presence as outsiders. But on every occasion this reticence quickly dissipated as conversations ensued and appropriately “gay” performances came into view all-around, underscoring how much each man in attendance belonged in this setting.

For those seeking it, home gatherings are opportunities for gay men to surface non-normative and more flamboyant characteristics. Most hosts decorate their homes with some – or many – traces of gay icons and sexualized paraphernalia that are hypothetically contraband in Dubai. At one gathering, there were gay-themed lifestyle magazines, homo-erotic artworks, and miniature LGBT+ rainbow flags adorning the home. After watching *Drag Race*, one of the guys started telling stories about his own sexual escapades, related to the episode’s colorful storyline. The host proceeded to take a substantial dildo down from his bookcase, where it had been positioned like a trophy, and passed it around amid guttural laughter to add illustration to some of the tall tale. Some version of this highly sexualized humor underwrote much of the camaraderie in these spaces, whether directly involving simulated penises, or just sharing entertaining experiences that other gay men could identify with.

The presence of these elements helps integrate these men, affirming their shared sexuality as much as their pop-cultural knowledge, into this city where most talked about feeling fewer liberties than in other places they had lived. These gatherings also remind them there are safe spaces within Dubai to interact in almost any way they want. Here, they draw on not only aspects of the “global gay” (Martel, 2018) mentioned above, but more mundane in-group references and cultural products that Halperin (2012) refers to as *de rigueur* features of “how to be gay” – customs few people are raised among, but which they eventually discover, resonate with, and re-enact among peers, performatively developing a shared sense of queer space and community that can be as mobile as these expatriates, if they find environments in which to perform them comfortably.

Most interviewees talked about needing to find their “gay family” in Dubai as soon as they arrived, so they might make a “home away from home.” They were referring to a closest support network, which almost

all had succeeded in forming, and with whom they developed a network of care to share their daily excitements and tribulations alike – beginning with chat over negronis and RuPaul, and moving on to more heartfelt matters.

If we didn't have these social events at home from time to time, I don't know how long I would have managed to stay here in Dubai. Sometimes all we need is to have a few friends around – to chat, drink, dance and have a bit of fun. We know we can do that in any of the thousands of bars and restaurants of Dubai, but I guess only at home we can really engage in any conversation, such as talking about men without being afraid to think that someone may be overhearing us. [interview with Adam, 2019]

While Dubai is certainly not the most oppressive of destinations, especially for relatively privileged gay men, the constant subtext of heterosexism is hardly propitious, and indicative at an official level of the “microaggressions” (Nadal et al, 2011) documented as detrimental to LGBT+ wellbeing in broad terms. Nonetheless, these men find ways to embody home as a gay haven in this setting, rationalizing any personal sacrifices in Dubai as offset by professional gains, and mollified by these heartening, laughter-filled encounters that make them feel “looked after” and connected.

Despite unequivocal feelings of nurturing described by most interviewees around these Dubayyan nights in, the comforts of private home spaces can be doubly marginalizing. While Dubayyan outings are not lacking in options catering to gay expatriates, they mostly require performative occlusions of one's impulses, a self-policing that can be as exhausting as it is prudent; the home space offers refuge – closet-like – while nights out typically require heterosexualized conduct for the sake of self-preservation. On the other hand, the social barriers buffering such home gatherings are steep and well-guarded. Demonstrating the right kind of Western gay habitus, as well as having direct personal connections with people in attendance, are key. Wielding shared cultural capital about gay hallmarks, and delivering ribald lines at the right intervals with appropriate care and snark, feel practically second-nature to these men, but this requires cultivation and practice, usually beginning long before ever arriving in Dubai. This makes these performative geographies open for a diverse array of gay Western men who can show their at-homeness in such settings of laughing, sharing, reminiscing, and teasing, but marking anyone without similar past experiences and current positionings in the emirate as out-of-place here.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we document the performative geographies enacted by privileged gay men from the West, as they forge community while resident in Dubai. Like any group living transnationally, they bring some habits and sensibilities with them from abroad, but they also engage in new practices and forge new collectivities in the Dubayyan expatriate context. They mostly approach their affective and sexual lives with greater circumspection due to the legal context, but also describe themselves and interact with others as “Westerners” in a way that is novel compared to their prior scales and loci of significant self-identity. Our focus on performativity highlights the physically unfixed, temporally shifting nature of these geographies of belonging, and the crucial role of embodiment in making them come alive as somehow, variably, “gay.” The particular intertwining of fear and commonality leads to network insularity based on certain characteristics – social and cultural capital being more fundamental than economic capital in many circumstances – as well as contributing to a sense of gayness that must be performed in specific ways, at the appropriate times and places. These three qualified occlusions in gay expatriate Dubayyan nocturnal geographies – (1) on typical nights out, a carefully curated public gay habitus, at ease with exchanges between economic and social capital; (2) on atypical nights out, a strong sense of entitlement as equal or superior

to the law due to economic and symbolic privilege; and (3) on typical nights in, a private gay habitus stylized as bawdy and well-versed, but also vulnerable and sometimes nostalgic about other places – contribute to Western homosexual men feeling certain kinds of comfort as they keep out others, including fellow queers whom they suspect as threatening for being different from them. In these cases, Dubayyan geographies have been put to “queer use” (Ahmed, 2019: 197-229), but as we should expect, this queering is deeply imperfect – some might argue it is not queer at all, just gay, even imperious in its exclusions – so we seek not to celebrate but bring attention to how and why these queered uses are occlusive, which is also necessary for generating an imagination of how they could be different, more livable for more kinds of queer lives, in an always-incomplete process of queering.¹⁰

These findings help us understand how Western gay expatriate geographies function in an environment that is counter to the typically researched directionality of queer migrations. Our research also sheds light on two larger, under-researched groups: queer denizens of Gulf cities overall (regardless of gender, citizenship, privilege), and queer expatriates more broadly (across geopolitical and cultural settings). By focusing on this particularly situated type of expatriate, we find that power-geometric privileges associated with this population category as well as its internal diversity, as dissected by Kunz (2018), can become drastically simplified in settings where they confront shared imperilment. In this case, it is official homophobia; in others, it might be sexism, racism, or other discriminatory challenges affronting an intersectional subset of expatriates that bring them together in efforts to forge a sense of embattled community and to resist — or simply outwit — persecution. Performative geographies that bring some people together can also push others out, undermining the possibility of transversal affiliations across queer collectivities. For any of this to become more inclusive, expatriate men could change their habits of creating occlusive comforts, but that is unlikely beyond isolated individual efforts due to how discourses of fear operate to “align bodily and social space” (Ahmed, 2014: 69). More consequential would be a policy change, to have a less punitive and more accepting official stance toward all queers in Dubai and the UAE, to curtail the objective threats spurring these very particular, spatialized performances of occlusion-as-comfort. Of course, *de jure* changes do not equate automatically to better *de facto* treatment toward or across LGBT+ subsets, but they would help undermine the drive to develop distinctions from other queers to safeguard against fearsome suspicions. Even though privilege mollifies peril, as we show, the peril is still a legal fact; the anxieties this produces are deeply formative of how all LGBT+ people lead their everyday lives. While the expatriate men in this study avail themselves of various privileges to avoid the brunt of official homophobia – in ways that, e.g., poorer labor migrants or a variety of locals in Dubai might not be able – this does not equate to the erasure of peril for any LGBT+ person. This is analogous to how some having more effective defenses than others when under attack does not negate that all are being attacked.

While this situation might be read as an all-absorbing closet geography, with these men often in hiding, we can engage with the valences of this performativity to illuminate productive strands of further research. First, senses of community and closetedness are spatiotemporally variable here, wielded in accordance with privilege and as calculated in a particular setting. This points to the need, in the Gulf and more broadly, to understand shifting closet logics — not as “metaphor” (Brown, 2000) but as fundamentally life-and-death matters, which also shape who is included as belonging and on what terms. This could explore in more nuance how and how much gay Westerners of color are included as sharing common points of references and privileges, yet ineluctably experience different embodiments of that Westernness. Second, the very intersectional nature of these men's Dubayyan

¹⁰ On queering as a never-ending empirical challenge, particularly within geographical concerns, see also Browne (2006: 886-888).

practices points back to the necessity to address the two larger groups of which our participants are subsets. This research documents some of the most privileged among queer people in Dubai, but obviously Western gay men are not the only queer lives that matter, nor the only ones who seek to make “livable lives.” Queer people, in some form, are everywhere: from lesbian Emiratis, to trans Indian people, to bisexual Filipinos, and so forth across the differentially privileged denizen categories constituting Dubai and other super-diverse Gulf cities. Yet from an empirical, scholarly perspective, we know practically nothing about them: it is as if they were as non-existent as their ruling monarchies wish them to be, which is plainly impossible. We need to understand much more about other queer denizens of Gulf cities beyond privileged Western gay men — not only because their geographies will be different, but because their existence needs to be written affirmatively, with urgency enough to match the virulence of their effacement. We also need to understand better how these different groups interact in other super-diverse cities, deploying distinct closet geographies, possibly finding ways to build transnational performative geographies of allyship rather than distrust, forging queerer uses than we find here. How this varies for differently positioned expatriates (e.g., by occupation, race, gender), and across geographic and especially legal settings, would be fertile ground for future research on queer migrations and expatriate experiences that have yet to be charted — surely with much to reveal about the entanglements of peril, privilege, and transnational performative geographies.

Appendix A. . Interviewees

#	Pseudonym	Age	Nationality	Profession	Relationship Status	Years in Dubai
1	Adam	30	American	lawyer	single	2–5
2	Alejandro	31	Mexican	civil engineer	single	5–10
3	Artème	29	French	airline crew	single	5–10
4	Bernard	27	Dutch	marketing professional	single	2–5
5	Brian	32	British	civil servant	single	5–10
6	Cedric	24	Belgian	civil engineer	single	2–5
7	Daniel	27	British	lawyer	single	5–10
8	Édouard	34	Luxembourgish	architect	partnered	>10
9	Frank	29	British	financier	single	5–10
10	Gavin	42	Australian	physician	partnered	2–5
11	Ian	29	British	lawyer	single	2–5
12	Iván	28	Chilean	airline crew	single	5–10
13	José	33	Argentinian	chef	single	2–5
14	Juan	30	Spanish	civil servant	single	2–5
15	Keith	48	British	entrepreneur	partnered	5–10
16	Leonardo	26	Brazilian	airline crew	single	2–5
17	Manuel	30	Portuguese	financier	single	5–10
18	Matthew	26	American	financier	single	2–5
19	Nasser	28	Peruvian	business consultant	single	2–5
20	Rayyan	37	Canadian	teacher	single	>10
21	Richard	33	Canadian	airline crew	partnered	>10
22	Robert	39	British	lawyer	partnered	5–10
23	Russ	35	American	civil servant	single	2–5
24	Sebastián	28	Argentinian	architect	single	5–10
25	Victor	32	French	business consultant	single	2–5
26	Zak	34	American	business consultant	single	5–10

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ryan Centner: Conceptualization, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration. **Manoel Pereira Neto:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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