

Interview with Maya Mikdashi and Carlos Motta on *Deseos* / رغبات

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Abstract Special issue editors Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici interview Maya Mikdashi and Carlos Motta about their collaborative film, *Deseos* / رغبات (*Desires*, 2015), which places queer and gender-variant historical characters within a fluid chronological framework. In this interview, Mikdashi and Motta discuss issues such as imperial and colonial temporality, queer networks of community, and a desire for happy endings in history.

Keywords decoloniality, queer temporality, film and video art, Ottoman Empire, Spanish Empire, transgender studies, imagination, historical narration

This interview with Maya Mikdashi, an anthropologist and assistant professor in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies at Rutgers University, and Carlos Motta, a multidisciplinary artist based in New York, emerges from an event on "Trans*historicités" held at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University in November of 2017. For that event, the editors of this special issue invited several artists, activists, and scholars to discuss how their work engages with history and notions of time. Among them, Maya Mikdashi and Carlos Motta discussed their thirty-three-minute film, *Deseos* / رغبات (*Desires*, 2015), which exposes the ways in which medicine, law, religion, and cultural tradition shaped dominant discourses of the gendered and sexed body through the narration of two parallel stories: that of Martina, who lived in Colombia during the late colonial period of the early nineteenth century and that of Nour, who lived in Beirut during the late Ottoman Empire. Part documentary and part fiction, the film presents an imaginary correspondence between these individuals. The criminal court of colonial New Granada prosecuted Martina in 1803 for being a "hermaphrodite" after being accused by her female lover of having a body that was "against nature." Martina was tried in a court of law and ultimately set free after medical doctors appointed by the court were unable to find evidence of her lover's accusation. This story is

documented in the 1803 legal case found in the Archivo General de la Nación in Bogotá, Colombia. Meanwhile in Beirut, Nour married her female lover's brother after her mother found them making love. Although Nour's story does not occur in a courtroom, nor is it found in an extant legal case, notions of Islamic and late Ottoman laws, cultures, and histories condition her narrative. We posed a series of questions to the filmmakers following the event.

Leah DeVun and Zeb Tortorici: *Deseos / رغبات* (2015) engages questions of history, moving across disciplines and boundaries, bodies and desires. Could you discuss how your work plays with time, especially nonlinear notions of chronology, to consider overlapping colonial legacies, decolonial praxis, or other kinds of dislocations?

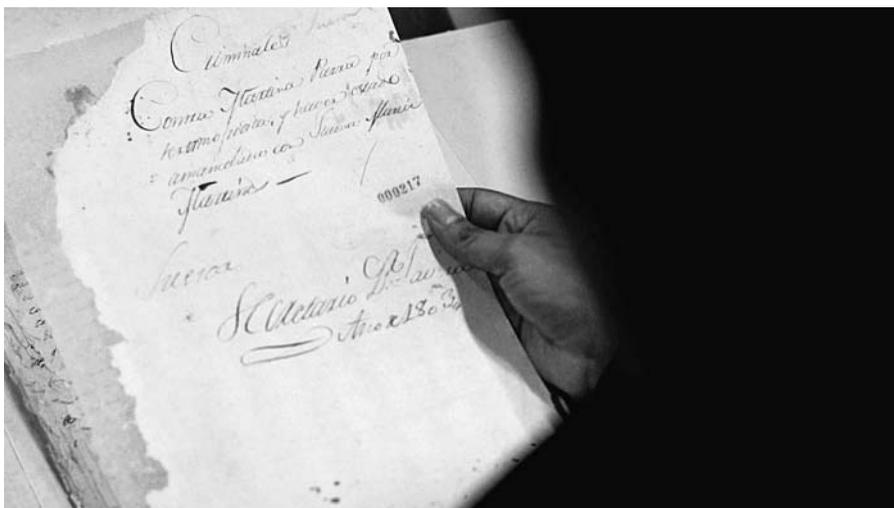
Maya Mikdashi: When we began writing *Deseos / رغبات*, one of our guiding questions was how to imagine the cacophony of imperial and colonial temporality, a temporality that our current lives—living in a settler colony that is also the world's imperial hegemon—are also unfolding within. The most striking temporal dissonance in our film is between the script and the visual image. While the script and the characters are written as nineteenth century, the visuals are contemporary and filmed on location in Lebanon and Colombia. This dissonance points to a rupture in the epistemological barriers between the past and the present, between archives and the future (it should be noted that the ordering of experience into discrete categories of past, present, and future—the production of “history”—was also very much a colonial technology). The dissonance also highlights, or points to some of the tensions that emerge when thinking and researching sexuality and gender systems in a trans-temporal framework, in terms of how our desire for particular histories and records chafes against our theoretical training and commitments (Freeman 2010; Fuentes 2016; Gordon 2008). I have to say, for me personally it was very interesting to write from this particular time period (early nineteenth century) precisely because of the different imperial networks, and their attendant legal regimes, that are (re)making the world at that time. Legal regimes are citational over time, and many aspects of the legal ideologies and practices discussed in our film live on robustly in current legal systems. For us, part of thinking about ways of making and regulating life and the category of the human, particularly life that may today be considered “queer,” occurs at the intersections of criminality, personal status, religiosity, secularism, and imperial law. In my academic work, an ethnography of the contemporary Lebanese legal system and its regulation of sexual difference and secularism during the US-led international war on terror, the intersections are strikingly similar, though the actors have to a large extent changed.



Carlos Motta: *Deseos / رغبات* is an experiment in translocations of time. Our characters are separated by geography, language, culture, class, ethnicity, political context, and by the impossibility to ever have really met. Yet they share the experience of secrecy and silence, and they correspond lovingly—as best friends—by writing letters to each other. Today, the Internet has made (some of) these boundaries easier to bypass and has created networks of queer relationality and kinship. Nineteenth-century queers, however, lived in isolation by contemporary standards. Even though it is known that queers may have had certain networks of connectivity, international relations seem unlikely. This film plays with time to reflect on the creation of the language of oppression and queers' strategies of liberation and survival.

LD and ZT: *Your film reimagines past images and narratives, finding inspiration in the colonial archives of Nueva Granada (in present-day Colombia) and in the imaginative and speculative histories of the Ottoman Empire (in present-day Lebanon and Syria). How does history operate imaginatively in your work, either as a vehicle for what might have happened, or as a set of aspirations for the future? What does your work have to say to those who might envision it as relevant to the history of queer or trans experience? We wonder if you could talk more about what fantasies or fictions in history do for us in these works, or more broadly.*

MM: To write this film, Carlos and I wrote letters to each other in character as Martina and Nour over a period of months, producing pages of correspondence that were eventually pared down to a script. As we wrote to each other, we were corresponding through a historical/future longing: a desire for the possibilities of



archival research, and the possibilities of history outside archives, a desire for the unexpected and yet ordinary (Cvetkovich 2003). However, we were not trying to find queer ancestors, or “ghosts” in our archives (Arondekar 2009; Freeman 2010); rather, we claim a place for Martina and Nour in the national histories of Lebanon, Syria, and Colombia and in the imperial and colonial histories of the Ottoman and Spanish Empires. We use “national history” with attention to both the spectacular and mundane aspects of national production in the nation-state era (an era that produces the nation as previous to, and desiring of, a state), and with a deep knowledge of the power of “national history.” Martina, in fact, is written as a hero of the independence struggle.

This is not a film that speaks (only) of a transnational queer experience, particularly as “transnational queer experience” is a highly racialized and classed category and seems to largely operate in the temporality of the now and its futures. Rather, *Deseos* / رغبات assumes that nonnormative, queer, and female experience is always deeply rooted in place—and invites viewers to experience and imagine the multiple ways that “queer” is always connected to its specific locality, both in place and time. Islam, as a highly translocal/transregional religion and practice, has been and is a framework out of which queer practice can emerge. To put it in another way, any hegemonic sex/gender system contains within it the conditions of possibility for play within that system. For example, there is a line in *Deseos* / رغبات in which Nour is telling Martina about her happiness and her sense of excitement that her lover is marrying her brother, while Nour herself is marrying her lover’s brother. Her excitement emerges from the constraints and possibilities inherent in the time and place she lived in. Nour says to Martina that she and her lover will breast-feed each other’s children and thus make a family—articulating a well-



known precept of Islamic law—that breast feeding from the same women creates a marriage prohibition, the definition of kinship. There are many moments in our script that speak specifically to non-Western audiences (including my failed attempt to imagine and perform a pre-nation-state, Levantine dialect in the voice-over), and part of the cacophony of temporality of our film is the cacophony of audience reception. For example, in our script and film we also wanted to draw attention to the historical relationship, a history much longer than the nation-state, between Beirut and Damascus. This was important to us because at the time of making and conceptualizing the film (and still, to this day) there are over 2 million Syrian refugees and displaced peoples in Lebanon, and they are subject to a xenophobic, highly racialized and sexualized security state. In fact, a discourse of homophobia is emerging transnationally as a critical securitizing, racializing, and dehumanizing tactic aimed at Syrian refugees. Over one-fourth of the current population of Lebanon are refugees from different parts of the region (Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi, Sudanese). In our film we wanted to give an account of the pre-nation, and pre-state-system history of the area (and perhaps also pre-homo- and heterosexual), but also to remind the contemporary viewer that, historically, Damascus was the cultural, economic, intellectual, and cosmopolitan sun around which Beirut orbited. We also provided a different location from which to rethink what we now understand as transnational histories and genealogies of sexualities and gender systems.

CM: On finding Martina’s legal case, filed in one of the “Criminal Cases” folders in the Colombian National Archives in Bogotá, it was apparent to me that I could learn about her today only because of her misfortunes. Martina was tried for



being a “hermaphrodite” in 1803, and her encounter with the colonial legal system turned her into an instructive case for the future. Martina and others who were defined by the legal, medical, and religious establishments are exceptional cases that give us some insight about queer lives in the past, but these legal documents reduce their experiences to anomalies and entirely erase their subjectivities. Bothered by this fact, I felt that using this document as a point of departure to construct a more nuanced, fictional narrative about Martina would be an interesting device to resist the reductive power of the archive—and of history at large. Giving Martina agency and the chance to resist the bruising language of the law felt like an act of intergenerational queer solidarity. At the same time, I was aware that this “solidarity” could also be interpreted as another act of violence on her. I remained paralyzed by this contradiction for a while until Martina appeared in my dreams one night and told me, “Do it.”

Maya and I were surprised to learn that cases of female same-sex relations did not exist in the Ottoman archives (at least those we had a chance to research). The absence of these cases, however, taught us that the Ottoman legal system considered these cases as something to be dealt with within families. Creating a fictional story about a lesbian woman in Beirut at the time seemed again an act of solidarity. Nour’s story tries to address the complexities of her time as well as our decision to imagine her as a historical subject absent documentation of her existence.

Although we live in a (Western) world where stories of same-sex relations and gender nonconformity are widely discussed, I still believe queer lives continue to be defined by legal frameworks of social inclusion. The LGBTIQ agenda is entirely constructed within a legalistic purview in which citizenship equals legal



equality. Undoubtedly, there are some benefits to this approach, but, not unlike colonial times, this perpetuates a narrowing effect of the experience of difference. These cyclical repetitions were on my mind as we wrote *Deseos* / رغبات. While Martina's and Nour's stories are anchored in a seemingly anachronistic experience, in my opinion they are mirrors of patriarchal systems that have partly evolved but not entirely progressed.

LD and ZT: *Your work seems to offer us forms of transfiguration, ways of remaking the past and reorienting the future. The film, for example, is invested in what we might call a “happy ending” that is perhaps at odds with the reality of history (i.e., it emphasizes the power of friendship and affective relations over time instead of the tragic tropes of queer suffering, martyrdom, or death). What do we do when history doesn't give us what we want or produce the images and documents that we ourselves desire? How does desire structure your work and impel research and creative production?*

MM: Attuned to ways our own historical longings structured *Deseos* / رغبات, we worked against the notion of “unthinkability” as it relates to histories that would, in the present moment, be called “queer.” Our character, Martina, is twice arrested. She is arrested by colonial authorities on charges of having an unnatural body. She—her life—is arrested again by the archive, caught within a discourse of the natural, of criminality, and of the imperial state.

The closing of a case file does not have to be the end of a person's historical or contemporary significance. In my academic work I also use court archives and am struck by the same question, namely, that in those moments our closest encounters are not with the people found in a case file but with the regime of

power that structures legal and archival systems (Steedman 2002; Trouillot 1995). In fact, the people encountered in legal case files are somewhat interchangeable, and that is the point of both the legal genre of writing and the regime of power. In *Deseos* / رغبات we play with the idea that it could be possible to “know” someone who is found in the archives, that is, to play with a fantasy (our fantasy) that Martina in fact had a life outside the structure of our encounter—the archive. A researcher’s pull toward the archive is not coincidental. This pull, this desire, is itself melancholic (Eng and Kazanjian 2002). The archive is a temporal order: what we find in the archive, what we want to find in the archive, even what frustrates us about the archive, shifts as what it means to be a reader, a researcher, a person in the world, changes.

CM: Martina was set free after the trial, as they weren’t able to prove her body was “unnatural,” and this is where her story officially ends. In our fiction, however, her traumatic experiences are the fuel that gives her an emancipatory force and turns her into an agent of the proindependence resistance, gives her a loving partner, and lets her get lost in her “freedom,” forever. Nour’s husband dies, and she is able to live her life next to her lover, raising their respective children together in the family structure they desired. We felt very strongly about giving both of their stories “happy endings,” precisely to resist the prevalent tropes of tragedy that are typical in historical accounts of same-sex lives and within the present day’s legalistic frameworks, in which tragedy and trauma are ways to raise funds and enact equality campaigns. Our characters want to resist society and history’s desire to pity them and find ways to develop full lives beyond their official histories.

LD and ZT: *Deseos* / رغبات is a scholarly-artistic collaboration that emerged from a conference that you both attended. Can you talk a little about the experience (or productive possibilities in general) of collaboration across disciplinary or professional boundaries? To what extent do you envision your work as a kind of transformation or transmutation?

MM: Carlos and I met through the structure of our collaboration: we were both invited to be part of an interdisciplinary workshop that brought together artists, lawyers, and academics on the concept of the “unnatural” (curated by Council¹)—convened in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2015 at a conference titled “The Manufacturing of Rights” (Ashkal Alwan 2015). We were drawn to each other as friends and as practitioners troubled by similar questions and methods but in different vocations and institutions. We later started hanging out in New York, and actually conceived of the film during one of those hangouts in Washington Square Park when we were discussing friendship, technology, and the important work of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (in particular, the organization’s prison penpal initiative, a

direct inspiration for our letter-writing script). I have worked in film and theater for years in Lebanon and the United States, both before and concurrently with my academic career. We made the film over the course of a year, and it wasn't necessarily the smartest thing to do while I was a postdoc and supposed to be writing my book (by and large the academy does not reward these types of projects).

CM: Maya and I met and started our collaboration before the conference you mention. In fact, our dialogue with the core participants of the inquiry "The Against Nature Journal," convened by the Council in Beirut, led to the decision to produce an interdisciplinary conference to discuss the impact of Law 534, a (dormant) law in the Lebanese penal code that criminalizes same-sex relations as being "against nature." This project brought together a dozen professionals from different fields to contextualize the role that colonial legal legacies play within contemporary societies. *Deseos / رغبات* is the result of this dialogue, and its script reflects these informed positions.

Interdisciplinary collaborations have been an important part of my work for over a decade. I am a firm believer in the power of bringing multiple and different perspectives together when producing artistic projects, in particular when these deal with political topics that are addressed by different professions. This kind of exchange is not only nurturing for the work, it is also a fuller way of engaging a topic and of addressing a public.

MM: I found the experience of working with Carlos vital and vitalizing—it was important for me to remember (and keep remembering) that academia does not own knowledge production, and that so much of the vitality of theory, critique, and method occurs outside academic space. Academics know this because we are often inspired by art and visual and performance culture, but it is quite different to collaborate and produce work within and toward that space. I found that thinking and writing about archives in two different genres—academic writing and script writing—to be incredibly generative.

Leah DeVun is an associate professor of history at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time* (2009), winner of the 2013 John Nicholas Brown Prize, as well as articles in *GLQ*, *WSQ*, *Osiris*, *ASAP/Journal*, *postmedieval*, and *Radical History Review*, among others.

Zeb Tortorici is an associate professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literatures at New York University. He is the author of *Sins against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (2018). He recently edited *Sexuality and the Unnatural in Colonial Latin America* (2016) and coedited *Centering Animals in Latin American History* (2013).

Note

1. Council, founded in Paris in 2013, is an art organization and curatorial program that seeks to foster better understandings of societal issues by assembling people and knowledge from the arts, sciences, and civil society. It regularly curates exhibitions and public programs and commissions new work by artists, researchers, and activists. Their website is www.council.art.

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