Filming faith and desire: Encoding and decoding identities in Angelina Maccarone's *Fremde Haut*

By: Faye Stewart

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Abstract:

Angelina Maccarone's 2005 feature film *Fremde Haut* dramatizes the perceived incoherence between homosexuality and Islam through visual iconographies of desire and faith. This article studies the film's protagonist Fariba, an Iranian refugee seeking asylum in Germany, with emphasis on the ambiguous, shifting, and entangled representations of various facets of her identity as a gay Muslim woman. The encoding and decoding of Fariba's identity symbolically suggest a problematic coexistence for faith and queer desire, which become lost in translation between the Middle East and Western Europe. I investigate the film's polysemic codes for gender, sexuality, religion, and ethnicity, with an eye to the Iranian and German sociopolitical climates of the 2000s. Through *Fremde Haut*'s topographies and embodiments, director Maccarone interrogates the high stakes of migration and translation and their implications for human rights and survival at the start of the third millennium.

Keywords: Angelina Maccarone | closeting | homosexuality | Islamic faith | Iran

Article:[1]

Several recent fiction films about the lives and experiences of gay and lesbian Muslims around the world dramatize the perceived incoherence between homosexuality and Islam. Dramatic and romantic films with queer characters from Muslim backgrounds- such as *Lola + Bilidikid* (dir. Kutlug Ataman, 1999), set in Germany; *The Bubble* (dir. Eytan Fox, 2006), set in Israel; and *Circumstance* (dir. Maryam Keshavarz, 2011), set in Iran—thematize same-sex desire and relationships in Muslim societies, while also highlighting the ways in which homophobia, culture clashes, and violence can threaten the safety of gay and lesbian Muslims and disrupt their everyday lives. As these films demonstrate, Islamic faith and queer desires do coexist, but various cultural factors in both the global East and West trouble their mutual expression. German director Angelina Maccarone's 2005 drama *Fremde Haut* (*Unveiled)* follows in line with these

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trends but complicates them by representing religious faith ambiguously and intertwining the depiction of an indistinct Islam with the closeting of gender and sexuality. Maccarone's film tells the fictional story of an Iranian refugee, Fariba Tabrizi (played by Jasmin Tabatabai), who leaves her homeland after she is caught having an affair with a married woman. Desperate to stay in Germany after being denied asylum there, Fariba secretly assumes the identity of a deceased male compatriot whose application for refugee status has been approved. The film thus emphasizes the closeting of femininity and homosexuality: tension builds because other characters in the story take Fariba's convincing performance of heterosexual masculinity at face value, but the viewer knows all along that she is in fact a queer woman disguised in men's clothing in order to avoid deportation and persecution. At the same time, Maccarone's movie portrays Fariba's faith only indirectly, through symbols and suggestion, so the spectator cannot unequivocally read her as a practicing or believing Muslim, even though she hails from an Islamic theocracy. In analyzing and contextualizing *Fremde Haut's* entangled depictions of religious, gendered, and sexualized identities, my study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on the representations and experiences of LGBTIQ (an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, intersexual, and queer/questioning) Muslims in Europe and the Middle East.[2]

Maccarone's *Fremde Haut* tells a linear and seemingly straightforward story, but its complexity derives largely from the multivalent symbolism, sparse dialogue, and paucity of specific historical markers. This study therefore stresses *Fremde Haut'*s iconography and the timing of its release in shaping an interpretation of the film as both a critique of homophobia and Islamophobia, and an exploration of the high stakes of migration and asylum in the early twenty-first century. I begin by discussing the director's oeuvre and summarizing the film's plot before, in the first half of this article, addressing the significance of the movie's negotiation of identity, visibility, and transnational geographies in the early to mid-2000s. In the second half, I then investigate the film's symbolic vocabulary for traces of Muslim faith and belonging. My close reading analyzes the multiple meanings of visual elements such as veils, hands, and alcohol, in an attempt to disentangle the layers of Fariba's identity.

Fremde Haut shares with director and co-writer Maccarone's other cinematic productions an emphasis on intersections among gender, sexuality, citizenship, and social taboos. Born and raised in Germany with a transnational background, Maccarone often thematizes the crossing of borders in her stories. Films like *Fremde Haut* and the road movie *Vivere* (2007) depict journeys across national borders and through foreign spaces as opportunities for self-discovery and self-reinvention: *Vivere* narrates the existential struggles of three women, one German and two German-Italian, on intersecting voyages from Cologne to Rotterdam. The border geographies that characterize Maccarone's work also extend to the social boundaries that divide individuals and communities along fault lines of race, class, religion, or generation. Films with these themes include *Alles wird gut* (1998), a made-for-television comedy about a budding romance between

[2] The number of recent documentaries about LGBTIQ Muslims also attests to a growing interest in the real-lived intersections of Islamic faith with queer identities and desires, particularly as they are shaped by intercultural flows between Western Europe and the Middle East. These include the British television movie *Gay Muslims* (dir. Cara Levan, 2006), the Norwegian *Gender Me* (dir. Nefise Özkal Lorentzen, 2008), two documentaries about transsexuals in Iran, *Inside Out* (dir. Zohreh Shayesteh, 2006) and *Be Like Others* (dir. Tanaz Esheghian, 2008), Parvez Sharma's international and American productions *A Jihad for Love* (2007) and *A Sinner in Mecca* (2015), and an American production set in Jerusalem, *City of Borders* (dir. Yun Suh, 2009).

two Afro-German women who are surrounded by subtle and not-so-subtle racism, and *Verfolgt* (2006), a psychodrama depicting the high stakes of a sado-masochistic affair between a teenager and his married lover, a fifty-something female probation officer. In addition to making feature films, Maccarone has written and directed for the popular television crime series *Tatort* and *Bukow und Konig.* Her first episode of the socially critical show *Tatort,* with the provocative title *Wern Ehre gebuhrt* (2007), engendered such controversy with its representation of incest and notions of "honor" in the Alawi Muslim community that it has been shelved among the so-called *Giftschrankfolgen,* which no longer air.[3] Released in 2005, *Fremde Haut* is Maccarone's most successful feature film: it won the Hessian film prize and earned its star Jasmin Tabatabai a German Film Award nomination for best actress. In *Fremde Haut,* like in Maccarone's other productions, romance and intimacy feature prominently: here and elsewhere in her movies we see queer and straight women falling in love and negotiating erotic encounters, heartbreak, abuse, pregnancy, and motherhood.

Sexual desires and practices take center stage in *Fremde Haut,* motivating much of the protagonist's movement across borders as well as within Germany. The story begins and ends with Fariba's journey from Iran to Germany and back; both voyages are precipitated by the revelation of secrets about her gender and sexuality. The Iranian translator flees persecution in her homeland, where she faces imprisonment, torture, and possibly execution, after authorities learn of her relationship with the married Shirin. At her German immigration interview, Fariba does not disclose the grounds for her persecution in Iran—she coyly cites "politische Gründe"—and is consequently denied asylum due to lack of documentation. However, we soon learn the real reason that Fariba fled Iran: during her brief stay in an immigration detention center by the Frankfurt airport, she confesses to fellow countryman Siamak Mustafai (played by Navid Akhavan) that she had an affair with a woman. Fariba and Siamak confide in one another but their friendship is short-lived: haunted by skeletons from his past, Siamak commits suicide before his petition for political asylum is approved. Determined to stay in Germany at all costs, Fariba hides Siamak's corpse, buries him in secret, and assumes his identity. Fariba's performance of masculinity is so convincing that, for much of the narrative, no one suspects her masquerade. In order to refer to Fariba when performing Siamak and to distinguish this figure from the distinct identities of Fariba and Siamak, I use the designation "Fariba/Siamak" (shorthand for "Fariba as Siamak") and the pronouns "s/he," "her/him" and "her/his" in my analysis. These amalgamations call attention to identity as an effect, highlighting the optical and performative dimensions of identity production and emphasizing that, while the cinematic spectator sees Fariba in disguise, other diegetic characters see only the man they know as Siamak. Fariba/Siamak finds illegal work in a cabbage plant and a love interest in German coworker Anne (played by Anneke Kim Sarnau). But when Siamak's refugee status is revoked and Fariba's disguise is revealed, Fariba is deported to Iran; on the return flight, however, she once again dons the Siamak masquerade. The film's sociopolitical commentary finds figurative articulation in the constant renegotiation of the troubled relationships among gender, sexuality, mobility, and nation: unveiled as a queer woman, Fariba cannot live in Iran or Germany; but disguised as a man, s/he has a chance of survival in both countries.

As the above synopsis indicates, negotiations of gender and sexuality are more pivotal to plot development than those of religion and faith. Indeed, references to Islam in the film remain

[3] For *Tatort,* Maccarone also made *Erntedank e. V.* (2008) and *Borowski und die Sterne* (2009).

largely at the level of suggestion. Maccarone's movie may imply-but never states outright-that Iran's status as an Islamic theocracy makes the country a hostile and potentially deadly place for known homosexuals. But, aside from references to the affair with Shirin, the film provides little detail about Fariba' s past, her family, or her relationship to Islam then and now. The filmic text does raise the possibility of Fariba's Muslim identity through visual cues that evoke associations with Islamic practices. For instance, we see a veiled Fariba in the first and last sequences and in a photograph of her with Shirin. Fariba also abstains from drinking alcohol; wears a necklace with a Hand of Fatima pendant, which honors Fatima, daughter of the Muslim prophet Muhammad; and says an Islamic prayer over Siamak's grave. However, these representations connote in multiple ways and the possibility of Muslim belief is but one of their potential meanings, partly due to the contexts in which they appear, which endow them with additional significance, and partly because they also signify at the level of Fariba/Siamak's performance of masculinity and heterosexuality. Fariba's spirituality is thus at best coded and ambiguous, even though other characters conflate religion with ethnic otherness by ascribing Muslim stereotypes to Fariba/Siamak.

Maccarone's picture explicitly polemicizes the oft-discussed invisibility of lesbian desire and hypervisibility of Muslim faith by reversing these tropes. On the one hand, lesbian desire has been theorized in other contexts as absent, effaced, or at best encoded by scholars like Terry Castle and Amy Villarejo, as well as by Rachel Lewis in her analysis of *Fremde Haut,* which Lewis reads as interrogating the invisibility of lesbian refugees. *Fremde Haut* reveals the lesbian and her problematic desires to the spectator while at the same time dramatizing her lack of agency and her erasure from public life through Fariba's unwillingness to cite her reason for seeking asylum and her subsequent "disappearance" in gender masquerade. In addition, for much of the film, Fariba/Siamak can only articulate her/ his attraction to new love interest Anne through a performance of heterosexual masculinity. On the other hand, the filmic image also calls attention to the visibility of Muslim faith, which typically takes hypervisual forms in contemporary Western cultures, most prominently in the stereotype of Muslim femininity as both marked by and hidden beneath the veil. The hijab, Fatima El-Tayeb reminds us, "in particular serves as the key symbol of Muslim difference, representing silenced, oppressed women living in parallel societies that are shaped by ancient and primitive rather than modem Western structures" (83). Various critical responses to this trope find articulation in the work of Alice Schwarzer, Joan Wallach Scott, and Alev Çinar. Maccarone challenges notions of the silenced Muslim woman by depicting Fariba as a fluent and well-spoken migrant who downplays her language skills to pass as her shy, quiet countryman Siamak, who speaks little German. In fact, the translator Fariba is so well-versed in German literature and culture that she even helps a German guard with a crossword puzzle by identifying the Romantic writer Novalis as the solution to a clue. Moreover, Maccarone's cinematic strategy for addressing the loaded image of the veiled Muslim woman is to align veils with other kinds of head coverings, which serve a range of purposes in the film's German settings, only one of which is to communicate religious affiliation. In *Fremde Haut,* veils and hats are also tools in the construction of gender, and since the film narrative is structured around the sustained closeting of gender and sexuality, it emphasizes revelations at this level over examinations of religious identity. In line with Jasbir K. Puar, who deconstructs the "Muslim or gay binary"—the fallacy that the two categories are mutually exclusive and "incommensurate subject positionings" (19)—I attempt to excavate the Muslim side of Fariba's identity and bring Islam and homosexuality into conversation.

An analysis of these politics of visibility, however, is complicated by two other kinds of invisibility: first, the invisibility of Iran in Maccarone' s film, and second, the invisibility of queer desires and practices in Muslim-majority cultures. In order to address these matters, I engage a perspective akin to Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick's "cosmopolitan gaze;' which attends to the flows between symbolic geographies and imagined identities. Schindler and Koepnick encourage "critical perspectives that, rather than recognizing a nation's boundaries as constitutive markers of individual and collective identities, explore the globe as a symbolic topography in which local, national, ethnic, religious, and transnational traditions penetrate, amalgamate, and contest each other through shifting configurations" (13). In my study of Fariba's sexuality and religion, I emphasize that these facets of identity are effects of changing contexts and interlocutors, and that their construction through difference and similarity is an ongoing process within the globalized topographies in which they circulate. It therefore seems more significant within *Fremde Haut*'s narrative that Fariba comes from a Muslim-majority country than that she is specifically Persian—unless, of course, we wish to read the film as disparaging Iran. A cosmopolitan gaze at its narrative structure and symbolism reveals that the parallels between the cinematic Iran and Germany are more numerous than one might imagine, as the film "actively queers the binaries that permeate and regulate the institution of the nation" (Stewart 600). Although the spectator may initially assume that *Fremde Haut* is critical of Iran and Islam, which produce the conditions leading to Fariba's persecution and exile, its censure of Germany is much more explicit in revealing homophobia, as well as criticizing German bureaucracy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and resistance to cultural integration. The narrative literally begins and ends in the air: it opens on a flight departing from Iran and concludes with a return, but its spectator sees no direct representation of Persia or its characters' lives there. In fact, with the exception of the few documents that Fariba and Siamak take with them on their journeys—the false papers Fariba uses to enter Germany, a photograph of her Iranian lover Shirin, an envelope from Siamak's parents, and Siamak's Iranian passport-there is no visual evidence of their homeland aside from the gestures of their fellow airborne female travelers, who remove or don headscarves and long outerwear when planes cross the boundaries of Iranian airspace. The rest of the plot unfolds on German soil, and so the filmic Iran remains an imagined space, both for the characters, who remember their loved ones and the death threats they left behind, and for the spectators, who never see the protagonists' mother country.

Fariba's Iranian nationality appears less important to the plot than her Muslim background. If Maccarone specifically wanted to point up homophobia in an Islamic society, a strategy that Puar calls "homonationalism"—racializing other states through "the frenzied fixation on the homophobia of [their] regime[s]" (xi)—then Fariba' s persecution as a homosexual could also have taken place elsewhere. She could have been Turkish, Moroccan, or Bosnian, nationalities that have historically been more heavily represented than Persians among Muslim migrants to Germany. According to Samar Habib, silencing of homosexuality is not limited to Iran: "Since Islamic states, like Massad, do not recognize that there is such a thing as sexual orientation in the Arab world, such states would not be amenable to a declaration recognizing groups falling under the rubric of sexual or gender minorities" (xxiii). Habib also asserted, in 2010, that "it has not been proven that sharia-abiding countries like Iran have executed individuals on the basis of homosexual behaviors alone" (xxiv). However, the timing of *Fremde Haut's* release places it in a historical context that could encourage a reading of it as critical of Iran. The film's international

premiere on July 4, 2005, took place shortly before the public execution of two Iranian teenagers, Mahmoud Azgari and Ayaz Marhoni, on July 19, 2005, for allegedly raping a younger boy. Puar describes the international criticism of Iran by gay rights and human rights groups in the wake of the execution, culminating in the recognition of July 19 as the International Day of Action Against Homophobic Persecution in Iran (ix-xi). That year also saw the August 3 transition of power from Reform President Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), who advocated political and social democratization and liberalization, to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), leader of the coalition Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran. Ahmadinejad' s presidency entailed a return to hard-line Islamism and the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities, engendering rising international concerns over human rights violations. But, while these current events might have resonated with spectators seeking an interrogation of Iranian or Muslim homophobia in *Fremde Haut,* a closer look at its geographies suggests a more pointed attack on Germany.

Fremde Haut may implicitly reflect on Iran's failure to guarantee the civil and human rights of marginalized and persecuted individuals, but it places heavier emphasis on Germany's shortcomings, underscoring anti-gay and anti-foreigner sentiments. In theory, Fariba could have applied for asylum in Germany under a new provision recognizing *geschlechtsspezifische Verfolgung als Asylgrund,* which was passed in 2004 and went into effect in 2005 after years of heated debate under the Red-Green coalition led by Chancellor Gerhard Schroder (1998-2005). This revision allows refugees to gain asylum if they are persecuted because of their gender or sexuality, and its timing overlapped with a revision of the *Lebenspartnerschaftsrecht* to increase legal protections for registered same-sex couples. However, the film's setting suggests that these laws wouldn't have helped Fariba. Though *Fremde Haut* contains few details that would allow a definitive identification of its temporal context, one isolated prop, shown briefly near the end, provides an exact time: the dates on the forged German passport Fariba purchases locate the setting in mid-2004. But even if the 2004 asylum revision had already gone into effect, there is still the problem that Fariba does not tell immigration officials the real reason why she seeks protection. We never learn why she lies; perhaps she fears anti-gay discrimination in Germany too. Were Fariba to have such fears, they would be confirmed in the film's dramatic conclusion. Indeed, homophobia manifests itself as a devastating force far beyond the borders of the imagined Iran; it is also alive and well in Germany, where the violence Fariba experiences after she is outed as a lesbian culminates in her deportation. As Sandra Ponzanesi asserts, this critique in the film upsets the idealization of European openness toward homosexuality:

> *Unveiled* contests the notion that homosexuality is a Western concept which stands for emancipation and liberation while attempting to reconcile the idea of the immigrant, the stranger, with queerness. The model of Europeanness as accommodating sexual 'strangerness' is therefore deconstructed by placing heterosexism as one of Europe's dominant formations in relation to its racist ideology. (84)

The movie thus articulates a critique that resonates with Puar's interrogation of homonationalism, the racialization of homophobia as Other. Indeed, instead of constructing a homonationalist Germany, *Fremde Haut* intertwines heterosexism and ethnocentrism: Maccarone links homophobia with xenophobia by bringing both forms of bigotry into the characterizations of German antagonists Uwe and Andi (played by Hinnerk Schonemann and Jens Miinchow), Anne's macho friends whose assault on Fariba precipitates her forced return to Iran. The victims

of homophobic violence include not only the foreigner Fariba but also the Germans Anne, who is insulted and beaten by jealous ex-boyfriend Uwe and his closed-minded pal Andi, and Anne's young son Melvin (played by Leon Philipp Hofmann), who is terrified and calls the police when he witnesses these events.

Fariba's refusal to out herself as queer to the German immigration officials may also be Maccarone's way of acknowledging the differing sociocultural contexts in Western Europe and the Middle East. Fariba hails from a culture where sex is not often openly discussed, and where homosexuality is said to be invisible or even considered nonexistent. Fariba's queer desires are lost in translation, not because she lacks the German vocabulary to express them, but because she is unaccustomed to speaking of such desires. When Iranian president Ahmadinejad set off a firestorm of criticism by asserting at a 2007 event in the United States that there were no homosexuals in Iran, defendants of his claim pointed out that the English translation was indirect and did not convey the cross-cultural challenges of labeling sexual practices. Scholars argue that "homosexuality" is a Western notion, and queer identities are not always visible to those who seek them in Islamic societies, where there "is a common Islamic ethos of avoidance in acknowledging sex and sexualities" (Murray 14). Female homosexuality appears to represent an even bigger taboo in Iran, where, Reza Baraheni claims, "to attest to lesbian desires would be an unforgivable crime" (48). But perhaps these matters are less significant to Fariba's hesitation to call herself homosexual than the fact that few Iranians have been successful in gaining asylum abroad on the basis of sexuality-based persecution, likely because in Iran these offences are not often named as such. Suspects of perpetrating the illegal homosexual acts are typically accused of other crimes that are less taboo to name, which poses a challenge for refugees who must produce proof of gender- and sexuality-based persecution.

An interpretation of the representation of Islam, Iran, and female sexuality in *Fremde Haut* is further complicated by the fact that sharia law forbids not only homosexual acts, but all sexual relations outside of heterosexual marriage. Fariba, who has a relationship with a married woman, is doubly guilty of homosexuality and adultery. According to Iranian law, both are crimes punishable with imprisonment for life or the death sentence. Max Kramer maintains that in Islamic societies adultery is typically considered a greater offense than homosexuality: "the potential consequences of adultery [...] are much more feared (at least, they were in the past) than a relationship between two people of the same sex" (146). While this may be true in some Muslim countries, the film suggests that Fariba's persecution in Iran has more to do with her same-sex affair than with her lover's marital status. Though Fariba/Siamak at first tells Anne that s/he left Iran due to an adulterous relationship with Shirin, this partial truth can be explained by Fariba/Siamak's gender masquerade in this scene: Fariba/Siamak wants to open up to Anne, but acknowledging homosexual desires would be tantamount to revealing gender. From the point of view of Iranian culture and Islamic law, Fariba's homosexual acts may be perceived as even more troubling because she is unmarried and cannot be properly reformed by a return to the gendered role of wife. When Fariba makes a brief phone call to Shirin to inform her former lover of her safe arrival in Germany, Shirin says that her family blames Fariba alone for the affair. Much later, after Fariba finally comes out to Anne as a woman, she goes into more detail about the terrors she faced in Iran, including beatings, rape, and imprisonment. Maccarone' s cinematic representation corresponds to reality in Muslim-majority societies, which, Kramer asserts, provide "numerous examples of persecution, torture, and execution of people caught in a same-

sex act, suspected of same-sex activity, or exhibiting a proclivity toward such behaviors in another way" (145).[4] Fariba, who could be executed for her crimes, does not benefit from the same protection as her married lover, who can recant and be forgiven. The spectator is thus led to believe that the homosexual dimension of the affair figures as the greater transgression.

Fariba/Siamak's return to Iran at the film's close raises unanswered questions about the prospect of survival there. What kind of existence and future does this homeland hold? Although these concerns are outside the purview of *Fremde Haut's* narrative, which ends before the plane lands in Tehran, the possibilities that the conclusion entails are certainly problematic. The final plot twists of Fariba's dramatic deportation and risky retransformation into Siamak in the airplane lavatory challenge viewer expectations, as they come just when things finally seem to be working out for Fariba in Germany: she has acquired a German passport, revealed her gender to Anne, and she and Anne have become sexually intimate. Unlike many exilees, Fariba has no romantic attachment to her homeland and does not wish to return, so the ending cannot be viewed as a homecoming in any traditional sense because it happens against her will. The only part of this forced repatriation that she can control is what identity she will perform upon arrival in Tehran. On the one hand, because Fariba chooses not to go home as herself, she has a chance of dodging the persecution that awaits her there. On the other hand, a return in men's clothing brings with it the ever-present danger of being revealed as female, because in Iran it is also illegal for women to cross-dress as men. However, Iran also holds a chance, albeit slim, of acceptance, should Fariba/Siamak opt for an official gender affirmation as male. Some Islamic clerics see transsexuality as a form of heterosexuality, an illness curable with surgery: medical reassignment procedures have been legal since a 1987 fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini. But the possibility of this outcome is predicated on the assumption that Fariba identifies as or desires to be a man, an interpretation not supported by the filmic text. Lewis agrees that a construal of Fariba as "having assumed a transgender identity" at the film's conclusion "can only be read ironically and poignantly so" (433). Fariba/Siamak falls back on gender masquerade out of necessity: it is a means of survival. How far will s/he go to ensure her/his continued existence? The ending leaves this question open. Populated by millions, the metropolis of Tehran may offer greater chances of survival to Fariba/Siamak simply because it can afford her/him a level of invisibility not available in the small Swabian town of Sielmingen where the German asylum home is located.

Maccarone' s film thus takes the very real stakes of the lives of many LGBTIQ Muslims, who either closet their sexuality or face potentially devastating consequences, into the symbolic realm. This dimension of the film resonates with Hamid Naficy's notion of "deterritorialization," a characteristic of accented cinema: "the representation of life in exile and diaspora [...] tends to stress claustrophobia and temporality, and is cathected to sites of confinement and control and to narratives of panic and pursuit" (5). *Fremde Haut'* s poignancy derives largely from striking visuals and settings that emphasize the physical and emotional isolation of refugees, whose daily existence is characterized by limited privacy and mobility in overcrowded dorm rooms and

[4] Badruddin Khan verifies that there have been "incidents of death threats, and actual executions, of Iranian gay students who had gone back to Iran" (288). However, such claims do not necessarily include gay women. Scholars suggest that such penalties are more likely to be carried out against men than women. According to Roshanak Kheshti, "homosexuality (when interpreted by the courts as sodomy) is punishable by death, according to shari'a law" (164).

illegal employment. In Fariba's case, deterritorialization is further linked to "a crisis of the body" (Lewis 433), which is both alienating and imprisoning. Like many gay Muslims around the world, Fariba leads a secret life: enacting the "repeated negation and expulsion of the queer woman" (Stewart 599), she closets her femininity, homosexuality, and potential religious faith, all of which cause tension in her social relationships and put her at risk in conservative, rural Swabia. Execution, the punishment for homosexual acts in some Islamic countries, is figuratively represented in Maccarone's film as the political death of a character who is stateless and has no rights or legal status anywhere, much like the biopolitical non-entity Giorgio Agamben characterizes in *Homo Sacer* as "bare life." Indeed, Fariba barely lives, and she thus embodies the ultimate precarity, reduced to a form of "non-being" in that she is disenfranchised of all rights, recognition, and property (see Butler and Athanasiou 19). The emotional and social risks of being alienated from family and friends as a gay Muslim are conveyed through Fariba/Siamak's exile, which is both national and local, for s/he experiences deterritorialization even within the refugee community. Fariba/Siamak cannot get too close to anyone, including her/his male roommate: the danger of discovery lurks in each encounter and every conversation, and s/he must plan her/his daily routine in such a way as to avoid nudity and intimacy at all costs. Her/His refusals to undress, shower, or drink in front of others, all of which make sense to the viewer, who knows about the masquerade, create numerous awkward situations and distance her/him from others in the asylum home as well as in the workplace at the cabbage plant. Notably, it earns her/him several insults regarding her/his personal hygiene, which are often paired with ethnic slurs. These xenophobic insults push Fariba/Siamak to the extreme margins of her/ his already marginalized social position.

As *Fremde Haut's* English title, *Unveiled,* suggests, there are many layers to its representation of identity. The double meaning of the English title evokes a literal unveiling—the removal of a headscarf—as well as a figurative one—the revelation of identity after a masquerade. Although it shares with the original German title a double meaning that emphasizes the body as a boundary, creating an external/internal dichotomy that is at once national and physiological, *Unveiled* differs in meaning from the German name *Fremde Haut,* which translates as "foreign skin" or "alien skin." These interconnected layers drive the narrative forward, creating friction among mechanisms that closet and communicate the main character's identity. Once Fariba begins to masquerade as Siamak, virtually every scene generates tension through her/his performance and negotiation of gender, desire, religion, and ethnicity. In order to flesh out the polysemic ways in which Islamic faith is encoded, decoded, and intertwined with queer sexuality, especially in scenes in which it is (mis)read within the diegesis, I now undertake a close reading of pivotal scenes and key visual vocabulary that carry significant hermeneutical value. I begin here with the veil, and then I shall discuss hands and the *hamsa* symbol, Siamak's grave, praying, and alcohol.

The titular veil frames the narrative, functioning literally and metaphorically to conceal and reveal identity. In Western European cultures, the veil is often read from an ethnocentric perspective as a visual marker of religious, racial, and gendered Otherness. In *The Politics of the Veil,* Scott analyzes the veil's status as a metaphor for an ethnocentric Western fantasy of Islamic culture without regard to regional, philosophical, or political differences between forms of Islam: Scott criticizes the French government's identification of the veil as a "conspicuous sign" of religion and an "icon of intolerable difference" (1, 5). In *Fremde Haut,* the veil does signify Otherness in some contexts, but its symbolic association with other kinds of headwear adds

depth and nuance to this portrayal. At first, the veil appears almost exclusively in connection with non-German women: the film's opening and closing scenes on planes mark the crossing of national boundaries with the gendered act of donning or removing the hijab. During these sequences, the veil marks Fariba as Muslim while also allowing her to disappear among her fellow travelers; with the aid of sunglasses, it protects her by hiding her identity. By contrast, scenes at the refugee detention center, where Fariba no longer wears the headscarf, distinguish her visually from other non-European asylum seekers who retain the garment. Together with the detail that Fariba appears to be an exception among the refugees because she speaks fluent German, this contrast recalls contemporary ethnocentric discourses that read the veil as a symbol of failed European integration: one need only think of Schwarzer' s volume *Die große Verschleierung: Für Integration, gegen Islamismus,* whose contributors conflate the veil with non-European race and ethnicity. The veil in *Fremde Haut* is also a reminder of Fariba's Iranian past: shown in a photograph with Shirin, in which two smiling veiled women face each other, the hi jab metaphorically signals the problematic coexistence of Islamic culture and same-sex desire. When Fariba/Siamak burns the half of the photo depicting her veiled self, s/he erases her past; this parallels her/his embrace of Siamak' s past by writing letters to his parents as if he were still alive. But in *Fremde Haut,* other kinds of veils and veilings are situated in a distinctly Western context. Anne, Uwe, and Fariba/Siamak wear different kinds of headgear—motorcycle helmets, knitted caps, and hairnets—while working at the cabbage plant and traversing its rural environs. Whereas the veil is typically a marker of femininity, other related costume elements are vital to the protagonist's performance of masculinity: her disguise consists of clothing, accessories, and toiletry items like knitted caps, glasses, and the mascara she uses to mimic the appearance of stubble. Key scenes link real and symbolic veils through dialogue and image, such as Fariba/Siamak's first close encounter with Anne in the factory restroom, when Anne, who has apparently forgotten that her hair is covered by a hygienic cap, tells Fariba/Simaka that she cannot imagine a society in which women must don veils. The scene's humor entails two ironies: the veil-like garment that Anne wears at work signals her gender and low sociopolitical status in Germany, and she is ignorant of Fariba/Siamak's own identity as a woman veiled in men's garments. The haircap forges a connection between Fariba/Siamak and Anne and reminds the viewer of Fariba's femininity and Anne's working class status. At times humorous, often harshly critical, in constructing multiple levels of meaning, the film's imagery serves as a constant reminder of how veils and head coverings can both conceal and communicate identity.

Emily Jeremiah notes in her analysis of *Fremde Haut* that hands "constitute a motif in the film" (598). I concur with Jeremiah, reading the hand as a leitmotif that brings together the film's coded representations of sexuality and religion. Like the veil, the hand evokes several connotations, linking concepts of fixed identity—the hand as an indicator of gender or fingerprints as readable for legal status—and more fluid and less explicitly anchored notions of faith, religion, and cultural belonging. Depictions of and allusions to the hand take many forms in *Fremde Haut,* but the dominant symbol is a *hamsa* amulet, a decorative pendant representing a palm and five outstretched fingers, which Fariba wears around her neck. Human hands, particularly Fariba's and Fariba/Siamak's, are also loaded signifiers whose multiple meanings are emphasized in a number of scenes. This section of my article complements Jeremiah's study of the film, which focuses on the hermeneutics of touching and communication, by unpacking the film's visual iconography of Islam through a discussion of key scenes featuring hands, as well as meaningful spaces such as the restroom and the gravesite.

The *hamsa* is a polysemic sign and a sacred symbol of protection to many religious and cultural traditions, where it typically functions as a talisman to defend against negative forces, heal pain, and ensure safety. Called the "Hand of Fatima" in Muslim cultures, the *hamsa* does not function as an exclusive signifier of Islam because it is also meaningful in Judeo-Christian iconography, where it is called the "Hand of Mary" or "Hand of Miriam;' as well as in other cultural traditions. As Scott indicates in citing the French headscarf ban that identifies the Hand of Fatima among the "discreet signs" of religious affiliation, it is considered a less obvious or direct symbol of Islam than the veil (1). I read the *hamsa* pendant that Fariba wears as the "Hand of Fatima;' and by extension as a feminized code for Islam, but one that does not signify coherently. The amulet produces a surplus of associations by signifying Muslim faith and femininity in conflicting ways and different contexts, while also functioning as a symbol of protection. The Hand of Fatima is visible in several scenes at the beginning of *Fremde Haut* that narrate Fariba' s arrival in Germany and brief stay in the refugee detention center. Throughout these sequences, the amulet hangs outside of clothing: it is visible as Fariba is introduced to the filmic spectator, who tries to make sense of her identity as does the German bureaucratic system that attempts to read her through fingerprints, photographs, and immigration interviews. The pendant helps to construct Fariba' s gender: not only does it signify an idealized femininity through reference to the iconic Fatima, the revered and exemplary favorite child of the prophet Muhammad, but the symbol also is visually linked with femaleness through Fariba's performance of a female identity when she wears it. Among the many necessary outward changes that accompany her masquerade as Siamak—she cuts her hair, binds her breasts, and dons thick glasses and unostentatious masculine apparel-is the disappearance of the necklace, which Fariba now hides under her clothing, where it is no longer visible. Fariba's performance of masculinity entails covering up the Hand of Fatima, effectively closeting the symbol and containing its potential excess of signification.

Less directly, the symbol also reads as suggestive of the main character's Islamic cultural belonging and the possibility of Islamic faith. Three filmic sequences in particular highlight the *hamsa* as a focal point and endow it with special meaning. The first two of these scenes unfold in restrooms, a setting that appears at least eight times in the film, emphasizing the very public and revealing dimensions of private hygienic and sexual acts that typically unfold there. During Fariba and Siamak's first encounter in an airport restroom, Fariba's *hamsa* pendant communicates to Siamak that they are kindred spirits and ushers in a moment of sincere and meaningful communication between the two asylum seekers. When Fariba accidentally drops her necklace on the floor, her laxity and inattention indicate vulnerability. Speaking Farsi, Siamak interprets the ornament as a sign of kinship—"My mother had one like it when I was little"—and Fariba acknowledges that they have something in common, the need for protection: "It will keep us safe." This brief exchange establishes Fariba and Siamak as an alternative family under the protection of a figurative mother, the venerated Fatima, daughter of the prophet Muhammad; soon they will fulfill familial duties by comforting one another, forging a connection that persists even after Siamak's death, when Fariba buries him and takes over the task of writing letters, as Siamak, to his parents. Their connection has queer dimensions, not only because of Fariba's sexuality, which is the reason she leaves Iran, but also because the two characters later become symbolically one through Fariba' s gender masquerade. This symbolic and spiritually coded family model resonates with Gayatri Gopinath's thesis that "queer diasporic cultural forms

suggest alternative forms of collectivity and communal belonging that redefine home outside of a logic of blood, purity, authenticity, and patrilineal descent" (187). Fariba and Siamak's first conversation also draws a spiritual connection between them, suggesting symbolic shelter under the divine maternal Fatima, who stands in for the presence—or perhaps suggests the absence—of faith. Read in this way, the bathroom scene with the amulet communicates to the viewer Fariba's potential Muslim identity before the film discloses any information about her sexuality; the narrative can therefore be said to highlight an ambiguous construction of religion and faith over the clear articulation of sexual identity.

Also set in a restroom, but this time at the cabbage plant, a later scene introduces the romance between Fariba/ Siamak and Anne through the medium of the *hamsa* pendant. As seen in the above conversation with Siamak, the amulet functions to bring two people into close proximity and sets the foundation for intimacy between them; here it is again linked with Islam, albeit indirectly. After a near encounter with customs officials searching the factory for undocumented workers, whom Fariba/Siamak evades, with Anne's help, by hiding in a vat of shredded cabbage, Fariba/ Siamak goes to the locker room to clean up. The Hand of Fatima hangs over Fariba/Siamak's shirt collar, an unintentional display, the accidental consequence of the panicked search for a hiding place. The visibility of the pendant makes possible a revelation or betrayal through its signification, and Fariba/Siamak intervenes and interprets its meaning in order to contain what it could communicate about her/ his identity. A close-up shows Anne touching the amulet, and a surprised Fariba/Siamak seizes the amulet, pushes it out of sight, and turns away from Anne. These gestures demonstrate that Fariba/Siamak is hiding something that the amulet could communicate, and because of the *hamsa's* multiple connotations, we can read this as an indication not only of gender and sexuality, but also of Islamic faith. Seeking to contain the amulet's meaning, Fariba/Siamak responds, "Hand von Fatima, zum Schutz." The ensuing exchange between Anne and Fariba/Siamak on the subject of the veil, mentioned above, indirectly references Iranian law and Islamic traditions through a discussion of the different permissible kinds of veils while simultaneously bringing the two women together. The conversation ends with Anne asking Fariba/Siamak out for a drink; while the invitation demonstrates that Anne is still unaware of Fariba's gender, the options she offers—first beer, then coffee as an alternative—indicate cultural sensitivity and an attentiveness to Fariba/Siamak's potential faith. In this scene, Anne reads the *hamsa* as connoting Muslim belonging, but not as a symbol of femininity, because Fariba/Siamak successfully passes as a man.

The Hand of Fatima comes up again in a later conversation between Fariba/Siamak and Anne, where it explicitly communicates femininity, but this time it is only mentioned and not seen. In this scene, Fariba/Siamak and Anne hold hands for the first time, and Anne compares her/his biological hand to the *hamsa.* This sequence is significant because it signals a turning point in the stakes of their romance and emphasizes the dangers Fariba/Siamak faces, with German-embodied racism posing a particular threat. At the end of their first date, Anne and Fariba/Siamak sit side by side in the back seat of a car; in the driver's seat is Anne's jealous ex-boyfriend Uwe, who has had too much to drink. The sequence begins with a close-up of Anne's hand as she plays with Fariba/Siamak's, which Anne describes as "wie dein Anhanger"; an extreme close-up shows Fariba/Siamak's hand and then cuts to Anne's face. The meaning of Anne's statement is left open: What does she see that reminds her of the revered Fatima? The

prophet's daughter, who in the Islamic faith represents an idealized femininity in personifying the gendered values of chastity and moral purity, heterosexuality and fertility, and loyalty and respect, and whose husband is viewed in the Shia tradition as the infallible first Imam, would seem quite different from Fariba/ Siamak. The focus on Anne's expression as her smile fades into a serious look suggests a realization: she reads Fariba/Siamak's hand, and its similarity to Fatima's, as an indicator of femaleness, and perhaps nothing more than that. However, before Anne verbalizes this, the conversation is interrupted by flashing blue lights. The verbalization of gender and sexuality thus unfolds only indirectly and incompletely, while its potential consequences for Fariba, which include the very real possibilities of exposure, deportation, and death, are embodied by police officers who approach the car and single out Fariba/Siamak for interrogation. This scene points up racial profiling and double standards in German bureaucracy: though the police pull over the car due to the inebriated Uwe's reckless driving, they instead target Fariba/Siamak for a cross-examination and reprimand her/him for leaving the district in which s/he was granted asylum. The white German Uwe, by contrast, gets off without a penalty, even though he endangered the lives of his passengers. Policing the movements of a refugee therefore seems a higher priority in law enforcement than penalizing those who threaten public safety.

The Hand of Fatima appears for the last time at Siamak's burial place, where Fariba/Siamak removes the necklace and leaves it on her/his fellow countryman's grave. A semi close-up shot shows Fariba/Siamak's hand releasing the amulet, thereby again linking the symbolic and the biological hand. But unlike the other two key sequences analyzed above, in which the *hamsa* facilitates conversation and brings people together, this grave scene features no dialogue. Its meaning, then, must be tied to what it communicates to the spectator, and its placement in the film provides contextual clues: the scene follows a shot of Fariba/Siamak and Anne riding down a country road in a stolen car that Fariba sells to buy a false German passport, and it precedes the one and only love scene between Anne and Fariba, who finally presents herself to her lover as a woman. Since theft is forbidden in Islam and Fariba abandons the *hamsa* just as she becomes a documented "German," the grave scene could signify a turn away from Muslim faith, perhaps as part of an assimilation with German cultural identity. But this seems too simple. Whereas the context implies that Fariba has, in a conversation not included in the diegesis, by now revealed her female identity to Anne (and, by extension, her homosexuality), and that Anne not only still desires her but is willing to break the law to help her stay in Germany, the relinquishing of the *hamsa* on the grave suggests that Fariba bestows it on Siamak as a gesture of love, respect, or gratitude, perhaps in recognition of their queer kinship and to thank him for the use of his identity. It could also note a symbolic death, that of Fariba/Siamak, who will now resume her identity as Fariba. We might recall that the Hand of Fatima is a protective talisman, and perhaps in leaving it at Siamak's grave, Fariba unwittingly relinquishes the protection it provides and opens herself up to danger. Indeed, Fariba will soon encounter both physical and diplomatic violence when she is attacked and then deported.

Siamak's grave is also the site of the one isolated scene in *Fremde Haut* that reads as an unambiguous sign of Islam. Here, too, hands play a role, but they carry less symbolic weight than in the earlier grave scene; rather, it is the image of Fariba holding her hands up in prayer that gives them a spiritual meaning. After burying Siamak's corpse in a field near the refugee home, Fariba is shown in silhouette standing over his grave: with hands held out, palms up, and

head slightly bent forward, she recites a prayer in Arabic. This is one of the few parts of the film dialogue that are not translated in the subtitles, neither in the German version nor in the English, so the content of the prayer is unavailable to a non-Arabic-speaking spectator. Nonetheless, the attentive listener can hear one word repeated several times: "Allah." Fariba's stance, the position of her hands, and the repetition of the Arabic name for God indicate that the incantation is Islamic and imply that she is Muslim. The lighting and camera distance also suggest a spiritual moment: a long shot emphasizes Fariba's surroundings, and the sky behind her colorfully displays the warm hues of a rising or setting sun. Although the mood is somber, the transitional lighting suggests a new beginning, a rebirth of Siamak in the body of Fariba, or a new life for Fariba as Siamak. Because Fariba is dressed in her friend's clothing, it is possible to interpret her performance of Muslim identity as a part of her male masquerade; however, this is an insufficient explanation for her prayer, because Fariba is alone in the scene, and so she does not appear to be performing for anyone else. Rather, she is performing her spiritual duty as a new member of Siamak' s family, laying him to rest, or perhaps giving him the Islamic burial rites he might have wished for.

The prayer raises the possibility that Fariba is a believing Muslim but practices her faith privately, when no one else is watching, possibly for fear of discrimination. This sets her apart from other refugees at the Frankfurt detention center who practice their faith more publicly, particularly a group of men who are shown praying in a community room and are seen doing so by both immigrants and German authorities. Having worked as a translator in Tehran, Fariba would likely have been familiar enough with German culture to know about rising xenophobic and Islamophobic violence in the 1990s and 2000s, directed especially at Muslim immigrants from Turkey and members of German-Turkish communities. With her linguistic fluency and knowledge of German culture, Fariba becomes a prime example of the kind of cultural pluralism defined by Bassam Tibi in *Europa ohne Identität?* Fariba thus represents a counterexample to the xenophobic stereotype of the unassimilated Muslim migrant that has featured so prominently in ethnocentric discourses. Though the most palpable violence Fariba encounters in the film is linked to her gender and sexuality, she certainly also encounters threatening anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner sentiments. While Fariba cannot hide her foreignness, especially when she is pretending to be Siamak, who does not speak German well, she does seem to downplay or perhaps even disavow her Muslim identity. To be outwardly visible as Muslim in a country where Muslims are a minority could make Fariba even more vulnerable than she already is as a closeted, cross-dressing asylum seeker using a false name. The film clearly demonstrates that avoiding persecution and ensuring her survival are Fariba's primary goals, and, by including the prayer scene at Siamak' s grave, suggests that these priorities take precedence over Fariba's spiritual life. She closets her religious identity, just as she closets her gender and sexuality, in an attempt to avoid becoming a target of violence or bureaucratic intervention.

Although Fariba never openly or unambiguously articulates her Muslim belonging or faith, several references to Islam in the film serve to mark her and her entire identity as a refugee as Other under the label of religion. Indeed, the only times that Muslim identity surfaces at the level of dialogue, it takes the form of veiled insults voiced by others that serve to further marginalize Fariba/Siamak. The xenophobic attitudes and violent threats such labels entail are constructed as omnipresent, embodied in the figures of Uwe and Andi, Anne's provincial friends who consistently antagonize Fariba/Siamak. Uwe, who is doubly motivated by his narrow-

mindedness and jealousy of the attention that his ex-girlfriend Anne lavishes on Fariba/Siamak, serves as an especially vocal mouthpiece for ethnocentric and racist commentaries. For instance, he repeatedly calls Fariba/Siamak "Ayatollah," a Shia Islamic title given to high-ranking clerics. The name indirectly suggests that Fariba/Siamak is Muslim, but though it is a sign of great respect in Islam, Uwe employs it as a slur. Uttered in the factory locker room, Uwe's insult—"Na, Ayatollah, wasserscheu?"—criticizes Fariba/Siamak' s avoidance of the workplace shower and conflates religion with ethnicity and hygiene. Although Uwe uses the name "Ayatollah" more than once, elsewhere in the film he uses other labels to express his cultural racism, for instance when referring to Fariba/Siamak's ethnicity as Mexican or Tajikistani. Thus, the use of an Islamic title for Fariba/Siamak functions here less as a characterization of the refugee's Muslim identity and more as a catch-all for all forms of otherness and ultimately works to construct Uwe as an embodiment of the devastating potential of provincialism and racism in contemporary Germany.

Uwe's intercultural incompetence and his disrespect for Islamic practices is demonstrated when he and his friends read Fariba/Siamak's refusal of a cocktail as an indication of Muslim identity. They know that alcohol is forbidden in Islam, and if Fariba/Siamak were an observant Muslim, s/he would not drink or consume any intoxicants. His friend Sabine (played by Nina Vorbrodt), who herself does not partake because she is pregnant, embodies hypocrisy by pressuring Fariba/Siamak: "Auf ex, Ayatollah!" Uwe takes this a step further and becomes physically threatening when he shoves a glass in Fariba/Siamak's face and says, "Komm schon, Allah drückt heute ein Auge zu," to which the refugee reluctantly responds by gulping down the shot. In other scenes, Fariba/Siamak refuses alcoholic drinks when they are offered, a repeated scenario that consciously plays with the possibility of Muslim faith. But because the motivations for not drinking are not directly addressed in the film, and because Fariba/Siamak sometimes breaks this rule, it is difficult to interpret reluctance to drink as a sign of faith. Indeed, it seems likely that Fariba/Siamak refuses alcohol not for spiritual reasons, but rather for fear of losing control over the masquerade, and that s / he is willing to drink when a refusal to do so would entail the threat of physical violence or exposure, as in this confrontation with Sabine and Uwe. The one and only scene in which Fariba willingly imbibes and shows pleasure in doing so is in an intimate setting with Anne, when having tea "deutscher Art" (with rum) and "persischer Art" (with sugar) is a medium for communication about their cultures. This scene signals a transition: it is the first time that Fariba partakes in the consumption of alcohol without being pressured to do so, and it thus distances drinking from her potential Muslim identity and brings it into closer association with her feeling safe and desiring to share something about herself with another person.

Alcohol also accompanies a touching exchange between Fariba/Siamak and her /his refugee home roommate Maxim (played by Yevgeni Sitokhin). Though Fariba/Siamak turns down Maxim's invitation to imbibe with him, the latter toasts him: "dass er wird auch eine freie Mann [*sic*]." By contrast with Uwe, who forces Fariba/Siamak to drink, Maxim only offers her/him a drink, thus bringing a more affirmative obligation to expression in his toast. The film's end elevates Maxim's toast to the status of prophecy: unable to live openly as a woman in Iran or Germany, Fariba retransforms into Siamak on the plane, presumably to return to Iran as a free man. The end of the film entails a metaphorical death for Fariba, who can now appear only under the veil of Siamak, and lays bare the ultimate paradox of identity with which she must live for

the foreseeable future. The final words, spoken by the protagonist in a voiceover in Farsi, demonstrate this conundrum: "It's hard for me to leave behind the woman I love but I'll do everything I can to return to her again as soon as possible." The woman to whom she alludes is a double-entendre: it is both Anne, who watches helplessly as Fariba is taken away, and Fariba herself, who dons the Siamak masquerade just as the voiceover is heard. The woman Fariba must leave behind also embodies the difficult coexistence of Fariba's faith and desire. Fariba would clearly prefer to stay in Germany as a queer woman, which might have been possible with the fake passport she purchased, had she not been attacked by Uwe and Andi, reported by Anne's son Melvin, and taken into police custody. But she must now return to Iran, where she either faces the death penalty or a life in disguise. While life in Germany entails hiding her Muslim faith and culture, a return to Iran requires closeting her femininity and her queerness. The ending of the film reads as an indictment of both countries, asking whether Muslim and lesbian identities can really only coexist covertly, symbolically, or in silence.

Maccarone's *Fremde Haut* is a rich and complex visual text that ultimately asks more questions than it answers, leaving matters of identity unresolved and open for viewers to decode. I have attempted to solve some of these mysteries by reading visual clues as indications of the multiple ways in which queer and Muslim identity symbolically dovetail while signifying differently. Whereas *Fremde Haut* overtly thematizes the closeting of gender and sexuality, the mediation of religion and belief, although less explicit, plays an important role in the story. Ultimately, I read Fariba as the embodiment of a potential—and at best partial—"Muslim turn" that is polemical in its openness and interpellates the film spectator in determining its meaning. By examining recurring symbols in the film, the viewer can trace a narrative of identity, but even a well-substantiated interpretation of such multivalent signs is open to debate. None of the film's symbols function unambiguously, so the many facets of Fariba's and Fariba/Siamak's identities still remain something of a mystery to be solved anew. We could interpret the film as taking up Tibi's notion of cultural pluralism, indicating fluency in multiple cultures, and complicating it by suggesting a form of queer Muslim pluralism. Muslims, and specifically LGBTIQ Muslims, are not always readable or visible as such; they take on diverse and multifaceted identities and embodiments.

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